

"A la recherche de la pureté": Colette on Women Writers

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ABSTRACT

"Pureté" is a key, if ambiguous, concept in Colette's work that provides insights into her ambivalent attitude toward the writing profession in general, and the role of the woman writer in particular. Colette links purity and poetry in her characterization of Sido as a pure poet, and in her assessment of two other poets: Hélène Picard, whose work exemplifies pure poetry, and Renée Vivien, the impure poet whose portrait is included in *Le Pur et l'impur* (1932). This study shows how Colette manipulates the concepts of pure and impure in order to highlight her difference from other women writers as she forges a new and positive identity for herself as a prose writer.

RÉSUMÉ

"La "pureté" est un concept vital, mais ambigu, dans l'œuvre de Colette qui peut élucider son attitude ambivalente envers le métier de l'écrivain en général, et surtout le rôle de la femme-écrivain. Colette relie la pureté et la poésie quand elle caractérise Sido comme un "poète pur," et dans son évaluation de deux autres poètes: Hélène Picard, dont l'œuvre exemplifie la poésie pure, et Renée Vivien, le poète "impur" dont le portrait figure dans *Le Pur et l'impur* (1932). Cette étude démontre comment Colette manipule les concepts du "pur" et de "l'impur" enfin de se distinguer des autres femmes-écrivains, tandis qu'elle se forge une nouvelle identité positive comme prosateur.

The first part of my title, borrowed from a chapter in Anne Ketchum's book on Colette, can be read in two ways - as Colette's own search for "pureté" which critics generally relate to the lost paradise of her youth, and particularly to her mother Sido, and as the searching literary critics do as we look through the volumes of Colette's work in order to construct a coherent meaning around the concept of "pureté." In either case, "pur," "pureté," and their opposites are key words that critics frequently focus on in an effort to understand Colette's notions of sexuality, writing, and the relation between the two. They are, as Jacob Stockinger puts it, "imprecise concepts that provide a constant in Colette's ethical and esthetic visions from the early Claudine novels to the ambitious *Le Pur et l'impur* where the ambiguities of such moralist terminology generate an entire system of narration, character, events and images" (360). Let me underline the word "imprecise" here and refer to the final paragraph of *Le Pur et l'impur* where the narrator, "Madame Colette," after having given innumerable examples of the impure, admits to her readers that "pur" has not yielded an intelligible meaning to her. She closes that book with an evocative description of the sounds of the word "pur," and the images of clearness - crystal, water, bubbles - she associates with it. "Je n'en suis qu'à étancher une soif optique

de pureté dans les transparences qui l'évoquent, dans les bulles, l'eau massive, et les sites imaginaires retranchés, hors d'atteinte, au sein d'un épais cristal" (3: 653).

My own "recherche de la pureté" will concentrate on how Colette applies "le pur" to women writers by examining what she wrote about Hélène Picard and Renée Vivien, two women poets who seem to epitomize, respectively, the pure and the impure for her. Moreover, by linking "le pur" specifically with poetry, as Colette herself does, we can focus the elusive play of pure and impure in Colette's crystal ball, and throw some light on her attitude toward women writing and the curiously negative attitude she demonstrated towards her profession as a woman writer. Elaine Marks contends that attempts to situate Colette in relation to her generation of French women writers usually fail because she eludes the habitual categories, remaining on the margins, crossing or slipping in and out of categories such as gender, social class, urban/rural, learned/popular culture and literary genres ("Celebrating Colette" ix). Colette's notions of the pure and impure provide yet another ambiguous pairing, but when specifically applied to her ideas on poetry, they nevertheless yield important insights into the new identity of prose writer she was forging for herself by highlighting

her difference from other women writers.

Colette is famous for her reticence to talk about her own writing, an attitude that went hand in hand with her general resistance to the connotations associated with the role of woman writer. She repeatedly denied any calling for this joyless vocation forced on her by necessity, and when the Royal Belgian Academy of French Language and Literature elected her a member in 1936, she began her acceptance speech by expressing her astonishment at finding herself a writer: "Je suis devenue écrivain sans m'en apercevoir...je m'étonnais encore que l'on m'appelât écrivain, qu'un éditeur et un public me traitassent en écrivain..." (3: 1079). Near the end of her life, after more than sixty titles, numerous awards, and worldwide recognition for her work, she grudgingly accepted writing as a habit that was impossible to break. It was only when she finally found herself a famous old woman who could at last write for her own pleasure - that is, without the intention of actually publishing what she wrote - that she allowed herself to feel some joy in the art she had cultivated for over half a century.

Colette's attitude about writing was decidedly anti-intellectual, and she produced a sensual prose that Anne Ketchum characterizes as de-intellectual in that she restored writing to life by awakening the body, sensuality and sensual enjoyment from inertia and indifference ("Colette and the Enterprise of Writing" 22). Colette laid no claim to a system of thought or to a methodology, rejected the suggestion of reducing her work to "idées reçues," and insisted that "idéés générales" suited her badly. "Il y a trois parures qui me vont très mal: les chapeaux empanachés, les idéés générales et les boucles d'oreille" ("La Poésie que j'aime" 577). More than one reporter went away disappointed at being deprived of insights into the workings of this woman of letters who refused to call herself one, and who claimed no special method to her writing. One of her "Dialogues à une voix" entitled "Interview" says it best by saying nothing at all. Commenting on the silence of the interviewee, the journalist exclaims: "Comment, vous n'avez pas ouvert la bouche? Ah! que c'est femme, ce mot-là, que c'est femme! mais rien que dans ce mot-là, il y a cent lignes de psychologie!... La femme, n'est-elle pas toute dans ce qu'elle tait"? (*Mille et un matins* 247-48).

Although Colette's silence about her own

work was matched by a general refusal to write criticism about the work of other female authors, she was known to write to and about the numerous women writers she knew in a variety of different contexts - correspondence, memoirs, lectures, and journal articles. If not exactly criticism, her comments draw a clear distinction between the women poets she knew, and her own career as a professional prose writer, that we can interpret in light of her notions of pure poetry and the pure poet. Two texts are especially enlightening in this respect. The first is an article Colette wrote to commemorate the poet Hélène Picard, which was later reprinted in *L'Etoile vespérale* and their published correspondence; the second is Colette's famous portrait of the Sapphic poet Renée Vivien found in *Le Pur et l'impur* (1932).

Before we turn to Colette's opinion of these two published poets, I want to examine a few key passages in which Colette associates purity with poetry. The most important is found in *La Naissance du jour*, written in 1928, the same year she published her pamphlet on Renée Vivien which she later incorporated into *Le Pur et l'impur*. In *La Naissance du jour* Colette evokes her mother Sido as a pure poet who provides the model which her coarse and impure daughter can only poorly imitate:¹

Que je lui révèle, à mon tour savante, combien je suis son impure survivance, sa grossière image, sa servante fidèle chargée de basses besognes! Elle m'a donné le jour, et la mission de poursuivre ce qu'en poète elle saisit et abandonna, comme on s'empare d'un fragment de mélodie flottante, en voyage dans l'espace....

(3: 290-91)

Colette's impurity emerges, for example, when she gives in to the temptation to touch the butterfly's wing against her mother's advice. She marvels at her mother's abstention and links it with the purity she lacks.

A n'en pas douter, ma mère savait, elle qui n'apprit rien, comme elle disait 'qu'en se brûlant,' elle savait qu'on possède dans l'abstention, et seulement dans l'abstention. Abstention, consommation, le

péché n'est guère plus lourd ici que là.
(3: 290)

The daughter's guilty indulgence stands in sharp contrast to her mother's purity which Colette characterizes as "Pureté de ceux qui n'ont pas commis d'effraction!" (3: 290). More importantly for my argument, she relates her own impurity to what she calls the menial task of writing.

Colette approached writing like a tedious domestic task that requires patience rather than inspiration. But while her domestic art led to published books and a literary career, the "poetry" of her mother is unwritten, impossible, and thus remains pure, or as Lynne Huffer puts it, "it is precisely in her inability to name that Sido retains what Colette calls her 'purity'" (33). Elaine Harris goes even further in her study of sensuality in Colette's work, calling Sido "un double de Colette incarnant le 'pur' dans la polarité pur/impur" which Harris later relates to "silence/parole" (14). This last pairing is a variation on the "consommation /abstention" distinction Colette introduces in *La Naissance du jour* and extends in *Le Pur et l'impur*, the implications of which will become clearer in our discussion of that key work.

In her astute reading of *La Naissance du jour*, Huffer sees Sido as a device to translate Colette's anxiety at the prospect of writing. Colette prepares the way to becoming her mother's literary successor by putting an oddly feminine twist on Bloom's "anxiety of influence." Instead of asserting her superiority over the poetic skills of her predecessor and model, she denigrates her own literary achievements. "Madame Colette," the narrator of this text, admits, for example, that it is her mother who is by far the better writer, and yet the daughter becomes, in effect, the translator of the pure maternal discourse, who invents what her mother would have said to her (Huffer 34-35). And it is Colette who must decipher her mother's final letter, written in an incoherent confusion of joyful symbols that she calls "un alphabet nouveau" (3: 371). What Colette gains through losing her purity is precisely the authority to write, as pure silence gives way to impure "parole."

But Sido was, in fact, a prolific and natural writer. Colette's loving descriptions of her mother composing letters in the middle of her garden with a dictionary on her knees stand in stark contrast to

what we know about Colette's own writing habits. Her correspondence is full of references to the rather painful act of writing, sitting not in a garden, but always at her desk, usually with a deadline to meet, and complaining all the while of the wonderful pleasures of life she is missing. Writing to her friend Héléne Picard in 1933, Colette complains about making no headway on her latest project and adds wistfully, "Avec quelle joie je m'y résignerais, si...j'avais de quoi vivre. Vivre sans écrire, ô merveille!" (*Lettres* 164; Ellipsis in original). Real writing, she implies, the kind you do for a living, is neither natural nor fun; it is hard work forced on her by economic necessity, and, as we will see, it is inherently impure.

The natural world that comprised Sido's kingdom is the realm of pure poetry. Colette highlights this relationship in another text titled "Le Poète" included in *Journal à rebours*, where she tells the story of a child poet in what one critic calls "the most serious statement on 'Art' to be found in Colette's works" (Makward 186). The narrator inadvertently comes across a young boy named Tonin whom she sees babbling and gesticulating near a brook. Although the stream drowns out his voice, she imagines that he is creating pure poetry inspired by the rhythms of nature herself: "Poète-enfant, jugeai-je. Sensibilité lyrisme qu'un entourage effarouche.... Solitaire, exalté, Tonin se donnait tout entier à la mission du poète: oublier la réalité, promettre au monde des prodiges, chanter les victoires et nier la mort" (*Journal à rebours* 31, 36). The child poet is linked to nature, the lost paradise Colette enjoyed in the pre-writing days of innocence she associates with Sido.

This description of the pure child poet is reinforced in a chapter from *La Maison de Claudine* called "Le Curé sur le mur," where we find the young Colette embroidering a whole world of meaning around the word "presbytère" without understanding what the word denotes. Joan Hinde Stewart reads this crucial chapter as a parable of the writer's genesis and argues that it "illustrates the primordial role of language in organizing and possessing the world, and suggests a privileged relation with words" (266). Stewart characterizes the child's world as one without boundaries where words "are material, tactile, voluptuous, and mutable" (267). Much like Colette's invocation of the word "pur" with which I began this

investigation, language is at its purest when it is closest to the material and sensation, and farthest from the codes and boundaries imposed on the written word.

Colette's oft-quoted statement about how she felt no calling to be a writer makes this pure relationship with language clear. An avid reader, the young Colette felt revolted by the gesture of encoding her ideas and sensations into writing, and for a long time she resisted learning to write. In fact, she unequivocally states that she felt born *not* to write:

Mais dans ma jeunesse, je n'ai jamais, *jamais* désiré écrire. Non, je ne me suis pas levée la nuit en cachette pour écrire des vers au crayon sur le couvercle d'une boîte à chaussures! Non, je n'ai pas jeté au vent d'ouest et au clair de lune des paroles inspirées!... Car je sentais, chaque jour mieux, je sentais que j'étais justement faite pour ne *pas* écrire.... Aucune voix n'emprunta le son du vent pour me glisser avec un petit souffle froid, dans l'oreille, le conseil d'écrire, et d'écrire encore, de ternir, en écrivant, ma bondissante ou tranquille perception de l'univers vivant. (*Journal à rebours* 145-46; Emphasis in original)

It was not until the day when necessity put a pen in her hand, that, she continues, "Je compris qu'il me faudrait chaque jour, lentement, docilement écrire, patiemment concilier le son et le nombre, me lever tôt par préférence, me coucher tard par devoir (147)." In other words, like that of Sido and the child poet, Colette's relationship to the world was untarnished until she was obliged to translate her impressions into writing.

Colette's stories of coming to writing show her slipping farther and farther away from the ideal realm of pure poetry in pursuit of a writing career. The two, it seems, cannot be reconciled, with the notable exception of Héléne Picard, a poet who managed to remain pure in Colette's eyes despite a number of published books and several literary prizes.² Colette and Héléne Picard first met in 1921 when both of them were writing for *Le Matin*, and they maintained a close friendship and correspondence even after a debilitating illness kept

Picard confined to her Paris apartment. The two women had much in common: they were the same age, came from similar provincial backgrounds, and shared a love of animals and good food. Despite Picard's early success as a poet, by the time she met Colette, she was scrambling to make a living with her writing and could barely make ends meet. Colette took her friend under her wing and used her influence to help promote Picard's career, eventually commissioning a novel for her "Collection Colette." When Picard died in 1945, a close friend consoled Colette on her loss by comparing Héléne Picard to Sido: "L'existence d'Héléne représentait pour vous, chère Colette, une nécessité profonde - comme celle de 'Sido.' C'est pourquoi Héléne et Sido vous furent données" (*Lettres* 229).

Colette's notion of pure poetry provides another obvious link between Picard and Sido. Written shortly after Picard's death in 1945, Colette's tribute to her friend reads like a defense of Picard's purity and opens with an image reminiscent of the final words in *Le Pur et l'impur* quoted earlier: "Une vie aussi pure que la sienne ne peut manquer de paraître mystérieuse. Il n'est pas aisé de lire à travers la sphère de cristal" (*Lettres* 11). What she sees in her crystal ball is a poet whose purity echoes Sido's in many respects. Although Colette never explicitly compares the two, it is implied in the imagery she uses to describe Picard and her poetry. Much like Sido in *La Naissance du jour*, who is up at the dawn's blue light, the pockets of her blue apron filled with grain to feed the fowl, Picard is an urbanized Sido who also greets the dawn to feed the birds, her blue pet parakeets, that is, from the top floor of her small Parisian apartment on the rue d'Alleray. Colette mentions the blue color of Picard's birds and her apartment several times, and her abundant use of nature imagery enhances the comparison between Picard and the earth mother, Sido. "Autour d'elle, les traces de la poétique abondance voltigeaient. Une de ses matinées suffisait, souvent, à ensemencer la chambre bleue" (13). Picard's poems fly around the room, she sows her apartment with them; her poems appear to blossom, to ripen in the sunlight, and to hatch open at the right moment. Her handwriting is organic, compared to "antennes aigues," and "pattes d'insecte."

Like Sido snatching a moment in her

garden to pen a letter, Picard writes poems here and there, on any odd bit of paper she can find, abandoning a poem in mid-verse to answer the call of her pet birds, or to stir the chocolate. "Quel beau dédain, quel orgueil, quelle modestie....Elle enveloppait, d'un poème à peine séché, la part du gâteau, le triangle de fromage montagnard plus dur qu'une tuile, qu'elle glissait dans mon sac" (13). And when Colette asks her if she has at least kept a copy, she replies, "Eh non! J'en ferai d'autres!" (13). Hélène Picard is, according to Colette, one of those privileged few who are born to write, and her profuse poetry contrasts dramatically with Colette's own painfully disciplined prose, a distinction she highlights by adding "J'admiraais cette désordonnée, cette riche, avec un émerveillement de prosatrice économe..." (13).

Colette makes a point of separating her prose writing from women's poetry in a 1938 lecture entitled "La Poésie que j'aime" where she calls herself a sort of monster, "un prosateur qui n'a jamais écrit de vers" (577). Despite the lecture's title, Colette is primarily concerned here with distancing herself from the genre often associated with "natural" and "spontaneous" women poets such as her good friends Hélène Picard and Anna de Noailles. Moreover, she insists that it required strict diligence on her part not to let an alexandrine slip into her prose for fear of becoming "un mauvais poète déchaîné" (581). This echoes the critical assessment of Anna de Noailles, the best-known woman poet of her generation, who was viewed as an undisciplined and essentially inspired writer, a view that Noailles herself often reinforced.³ When Colette asks Anna de Noailles if she intends to write more novels, for example, the poet responds "Jamais! Pourquoi me servirais-je d'un langage où je ne pourrais pas tout dire?" (582). Colette describes Noailles' reaction as an "hommage rendu...à la liberté du poème, à ses immunités multiples, au noble usage qu'il a le droit de faire de toutes licences" ("La Poésie que j'aime" 582). Colette, who is searching for the authority to write without having her efforts reduced to the patronizing epitaph of "feminine," distinguishes her writing from both the pure poetry of Sido, which she idealizes, and the so-called feminine lyricism of the best-known women poets of her day.

Colette viewed her craft quite differently from the public perception of feminine writing, and

she stressed the differences separating her from the stereotype of the facile woman writer on more than one occasion. In *Mes Apprentissages*, she compares the craft she learned from Willy to the sweeping up of crumbs and the assembling of broken pieces. Referring to Willy's habit of locking her in her room to write, she explains "C'est à elle que je dois mon art le plus certain, qui n'est pas celui d'écrire, mais l'art domestique de savoir attendre, dissimuler, de ramasser des miettes, reconstruire, recoller, redorer, changer en mieux-aller le pis-aller, perdre et regagner dans le même instant le goût frivole de vivre" (3: 1032). In *Près de Colette*, Maurice Goudekot confirms that Colette approached her art like a task with "toutes les vertus de l'artisan français, l'humilité, la patience, l'exigence envers soi, le goût de l'ouvrage achevé," adding that she found the word "inspiration" to be among the most suspect of the French language (21).

If Colette aspired to separate her own writing from the feminine lyricism, then she could only justify her admiration for Picard's poetry by insisting on its purity through comparisons with Sido, the model of the pure poet. Picard's poverty, her indifference to material success, and her closeness to the natural world are all important elements in Colette's positive assessment of her friend's literary talent. These same elements clash dramatically with the portrait she paints of the neurotic and artificial poet Renée Vivien in *Le Pur et l'Impur*. With Picard, as with Sido, Colette's differences from these women place her squarely on the side of impurity. The Vivien portrait, however, represents an impure image of the *femme de lettres* against whose dark image Colette appears in a purer light. The terms remain vague, and neither of them adequately defines Colette as a writer; rather, the Picard and Vivien pieces put Colette in perspective by showing her readers how she differs from the two writers representing the extremes of the pure-impure spectrum. That is, she "proceeds by negation" to define her position by telling her readers what she is not.⁴

Colette's portrait of Vivien began as a nine-page pamphlet written for the Amis d'Edouard series published in 1928, a landmark year for lesbian writing that may have influenced Colette's decision to write about the sapphic poet who had died two decades earlier at the age of 32. Colette later added material to the portrait, essentially

rewriting it to be incorporated into *Ces plaisirs...*, (1932) whose title she changed to *Le Pur et l'impur* in 1941. This book, which she believed would one day be considered her best work, is a series of portraits and anecdotes treating a wide spectrum of sexual behaviors. The topic obviously shifts the pure-impure discourse into another domain already alluded to in *La Naissance du jour* where the "pur/impur" pairing is linked to "abstention/consommation." It is a curious book, narrated by "Madame Colette," a journalist who tries to maintain an objective narrative stance despite her obvious resemblance to and identification with the character, Charlotte. Comparing herself to a spectator whose choice ringside seat allows easy access to the stage in case she decides to join the performers, the narrator also insists on the special quality of her "hermaphrodisme mental" which permits her to see with the eyes of a woman and to write with "une courte et dure main de jardinier" (3: 589). Once again Colette is on the margin, evading definitions as she slips in and out of set categories.

Colette's own ambiguous sexuality is not being staged here, although her earlier lesbian experiences linger like a shadowy presence in the wings. As Elaine Marks has noted, "*Le Pur et l'impur* restates all the forms of lesbianism and all the narrative commentary on women loving women that appear in Colette's texts from 1900 to 1932" ("Lesbian Intertextuality" 365). Marks argues that "it is as if the narrator were testing herself against the portraits of these women in order to determine whether or not she was a lesbian, in order to determine the limits of her understanding and her compassion" ("Lesbian Intertextuality" 367). Colette's portrait of Renée Vivien is only one of several lesbian portraits included in *Le Pur et l'impur*, but it is by far the least sympathetic in that it not only allows Colette to test herself against a lesbian, but also against another *femme de lettres*, as she checks off the traits that do not apply to her.

Colette first met the British poet around 1902, about the same time an inheritance allowed Vivien to leave England and settle permanently in Paris. Vivien, whose real name was Pauline Tarn, had been largely educated at French boarding schools. At a young age she had decided on French as her literary language of choice, and on poetry as her calling. A serious student of French prosody,

she also studied classical Greek so that she could translate Sappho's poetry into French. Much of Vivien's own poetry is inspired by Sappho, and although critics objected to much of Vivien's subject matter, they praised her verses for their "purity."⁵ The two writers grew closer after Colette's separation from Willy in 1906, when Colette rented an apartment sharing a courtyard with Vivien's. These were Colette's scandalous music hall years, when she danced half-naked and exchanged a shocking on-stage kiss with Missy. But it is as an older, more "respectable" and established writer, who has put her own notorious past behind her, that she writes about Vivien.

In the shorter 1928 version of her Vivien portrait, Colette's reminiscences about the British expatriate poet are rather touching, and she plays up the positive - Vivien's dimpled smile, laughing mouth and gentle eyes. Colette never mentions her lesbianism, but when she rewrote the portrait for inclusion in *Le Pur et l'impur* (1932), the material added was generally negative, depicting Vivien as a neurotic, oversexed and tragic figure whose lifestyle Colette finds frankly offensive. She not only rejects Vivien as a sort of lesbian Don Juan whose indiscretion is shocking, but Colette is completely revolted by the stifling decadent decor of her apartment, the strange exotic food Vivien serves and the thinness of the anorexic poet herself, whom Colette describes as starving for ten days so that she could fit into her costume for a *tableau vivant* depicting the execution of Lady Jane Grey. Colette's account of Vivien's closed apartment is often quoted, but perhaps the image that leaves the most lasting impression on Colette's readers is her description of Vivien as a condemned Lady Jane Grey, especially when we know that Vivien was to die only a few years later of an illness complicated by the anorexia, alcoholism and drug abuse alluded to in this portrait:

Elle était très jolie dans son costume, fardée, l'orbite creuse, les cheveux libres sur une épaule, et gaie avec égarement. Elle eut encore la force de figurer Jane Grey, les mains liées, la nuque blanche, versant sur le billot un flot de cheveux blonds, avant de tomber sur la scène, derrière la toile de fond, en proie aux plus tristes et aux plus violentes manifestations

d'un empoisonnement d'alcool, aggravé par l'inanition et quelque 'doping'....

(3: 604; Ellipsis in original)

Colette sets Vivien up as a clear example of the impure by emphasizing the unhealthy and artificial qualities of the poet whom she describes as exhibiting an immodest consideration for "les sens' et la technique du plaisir." Colette is repulsed by Vivien's thinness and strongly condemns her as a "Mme Combien-de-fois" for her frank sexual talk which included "comptant sur ses doigts, nommant choses et gestes par leur nom" (3: 607). It is not Vivien's sexual orientation that disturbs Colette here however, it is her indiscretion. In a text that is about sexuality, the author of *Le Pur et l'impur* goes to surprising lengths to say very little about it openly. As Elaine Marks has commented, "The narrator quite clearly prefers, in its purity, the unwritten, 'half-spoken' women's language of la Chevalière and her group to the 'cynical opinions' and the sentimental imitative poetry of Renée Vivien" ("Lesbian Intertextuality" 367). The polarity of opposites, impure/pure, speech/silence, consumption/abstention, is clearly at work in Colette's negative treatment of Vivien, who errs on the side of impurity, speech and consumption. Colette, on the other hand, opts for silence, as she reproaches Vivien for her indiscretion and then prudishly refuses to report what she says. What Colette does not say in this book is thus as significant as what she says. Sherry Dranch refers to *Le Pur et l'impur* as a "veiled" text, characterized by a censored style, ellipsis and metaphor in which a "clearly-stated unsaid, or more precisely of an 'inter-said [*inter-dit*: forbidden]" provides a "unifying matrix for what appears to be a loosely-connected series of stories" (177). What Dranch reads as an effective stylistic device also serves to align Colette with the "pure" qualities she so admired in her mother. By writing a book in which her own sexuality is set aside, and silence becomes a major element of her style, Colette opts for silence and abstention over "parole" and "consommation." Elaine Harris's stylistic analysis of Colette's novels brings her to the conclusion that "la grande qualité de l'art de Colette réside dans la qualité de son silence" (201). More importantly, Harris relates *silence/parole* to the paired attributes of *pur/impur* and *abstention/consommation*

characterizing Colette's perception of her relationship to Sido.

The period in which Colette composed *Le Pur et l'impur* coincides with a flurry of writing around the topic of her mother, a subject she did not approach until ten years after Sido's death. Colette's work reveals an increasing identification with the woman she sets up as her model of purity as she discovers both how much she is becoming like her mother and the full meaning of Sido's legacy to her. In her introduction to *La Maison de Claudine*, Colette explains that the aging process brings her closer to Sido: "la présence de celle qui, au lieu de trouver dans la mort un chemin pour s'éloigner, se fait mieux connaître à mesure que je vieillis.... Il n'est pas dit que j'aie découvert tout ce qu'elle déposa en moi" (2: 1090). Harris takes Sido as the central figure in Colette's writing, without which "le drame colettien est inexplicable" (180), and argues that the Sido created or recreated by Colette in *La Naissance du jour* "incarne la perfection vers laquelle elle tend, Sido est en quelque sorte le portrait que Colette fait d'elle-même mais embelli pour ressembler à ce qu'elle aurait voulu être" (182). I would argue further that this identification is reformulated in *Le Pur et l'impur* where the discrete journalist "Madame Colette" holds up Renée Vivien as the model for what she does not want to be because Vivien falls on the impure side of each pairing by her loose talk (*parole*) and sensual appetite for pleasure (*consommation*).

Those familiar with Vivien's writing and her biography might object that Colette's portrait does not seem to match the woman they have imagined - the poet who praises chastity in her verses and whose lover once complained that Vivien was more aroused by poetry than by her caresses. Colette appears guilty of creating another of what Elaine Marks refers to as "imaginary Renée Vivien," corroborating, in effect, the conclusions reached by the right-wing nationalist critic Charles Maurras, who also classified Vivien as "impure" because of her foreign origins, tainted romanticism and the "lesbian risk" she and other lesbian poets presented ("Sapho 1900" 186-87). Colette's agenda, however, is different from that of Maurras. By what she says and especially what she does not say about the poet, Colette proceeds by negation to condemn Vivien as impure, and the all-important missing element is any consideration of Renée

Vivien as a writer. She devotes the majority of her Vivien chapter in *Le Pur et l'impur* to condemning the poet's impure lifestyle, and barely mentions Vivien's poetry at all, except to dismiss it as an outdated imitation of Baudelaire. Colette admits that she finds it refreshing that Vivien did not talk shop with her and hid her work in progress under a pillow if anyone interrupted her while writing. Colette approved of Vivien's habit of concealing the books she gave to friends in baskets of fruit or flowers. She does make a point of mentioning the many letters Vivien wrote to her only to criticize them for their childish tone which she claims would strike her readers as insincere if she published them (3: 598). Colette shapes her reader's sympathies against Vivien by labeling her immature and insincere, and then by contrasting Vivien's frank talk about sexual pleasure with her sad and inauthentic poetry "où les 'amies' rêvent et pleurent autant qu'elles s'y enlacent." She also mentions the foreign quality of Vivien's poetic meter which betrays her British origins (3: 606).

If Colette speaks so little of Vivien the writer, it is because, she admits, she only began to find Vivien interesting after she was able to forget that Vivien was a poet: "Quand commençais-je de pouvoir oublier que Renée Vivien était poète, c'est-à-dire de lui témoigner un intérêt véritable?" (3: 602). Colette's comments betray her infamous anti-intellectualism discussed earlier, and partly explain her ambivalence about being labeled a *femme de lettres*, and the difficulty she had appreciating the serious literary side of an intellectual writer such as Renée Vivien. After reading Colette's portrait of Vivien, it is hard to believe that her poetry was acclaimed by many well-known critics who counted Vivien's verses among some of the "purest" ever written in French. Moreover, the modest attitude toward her work that Colette records does not hint at how hardworking and serious Vivien was about her literary craft. Charles-Brun, Vivien's Greek professor and literary assistant, once commented that it was Vivien's perfectionism that eventually killed her. He witnessed her tireless attention to detail as she wrote and rewrote her poems, noting "J'ai des manuscrits d'elle où sa main a proposé sept ou huit variantes, entre lesquelles nous avons choisi" (53). The discrepancy between the poet Charles-Brun admired and the one Colette would have us know

can be explained by Colette's efforts to create a new image of the woman writer for herself. Her portrait of Vivien detours her readers from a serious consideration of Vivien's poetry to focus instead on the impure aspects of the poet's lifestyle. By contrast, Colette emerges on the side of purity, having learned to incorporate Sido's lesson on abstinence and silence into her writing after all.

My search for purity ends then, where Colette literally began, with Sido. Although "le pur" has not yielded up its secrets, I believe that the images in Colette's crystal ball have allowed us a glimpse of how she manipulates the "pur" and "impur" in relation to women poets in order to forge a new and positive identity for herself as a woman writer. Not only is she redeeming herself in the eyes of her beloved Sido, but she is actively fostering her career by distancing herself from the negative stereotypes of woman writers, and especially "poétesses féminines" that existed at the turn of the century to create a new place for herself as a writer that defied conventional categories. She was, in effect, altering the rules of literary play, according to Elaine Marks, "by refusing to abide by the rules that govern the production of accepted and expected meanings" ("Celebrating Colette" x). As admirable as this was for later generations of women writers, one of the unfortunate consequences of Colette's personal agenda was that it kept her from appreciating what she had in common with other women writers such as Renée Vivien, who also wanted to break free of gender stereotypes and have their work taken seriously. The shadowy and ambiguous images in the depths of Colette's crystal ball did not warn her that the "difference" she was cultivating could only be measured at the expense of other women, and in so doing, she was actually perpetuating some of the stereotypes she had hoped to escape.

ENDNOTES

1. When discussing Sido, it must be understood that we are talking about the character of Colette's mother as she is constructed in Colette's texts, and not the actual person.
2. Hélène Picard's poetry includes *La Feuille morte* (1903), *L'Instant éternel* (1907) which was awarded a prize by the Académie Française, *Les Fresques* (1908), *Nous n'irons plus au bois, souvenirs d'enfance* (1911), *Les Lauriers sont coupés* (1913), *Rameaux* (1918), *Province et capucines* (1920), and *Pour un mauvais garçon* (1927). She also wrote a travel journal and a novel, *Sabbat* (1923), which Colette included in her "Collection Colette" published by Ferenczi. Picard was named "poète-lauréate" by the *Femina* jury in 1904, and she also received a Prix Botta for her work as a whole in 1920, and a Prix de la Renaissance in 1928 for *Pour un mauvais garçon*.
3. For a discussion of the feminine label applied by critics to Noailles's poetry, see Tama Lea Engelking, "Anna de Noailles Oui et Non: The Countess, the Critics and *la poésie féminine*," *Women's Studies* 23 (1994): 95-110.
4. This is a stylistic device characteristic of Colette's writing. See Elaine Harris's analysis of her style, especially pp. 216-217 where she concludes "Il nous semble qu'elle est passée-maître dans l'art de la non-définition, elle définit l'amour en décrivant ce qu'il n'est pas."
5. For information on Renée Vivien's life, see Jean-Paul Goujon's biography *Tes Blessures sont plus douces que leurs caresses; Vie de Renée Vivien* (Paris: Régine Deforges, 1986). Goujon has also edited a volume of Vivien's collected poems based on the 1934 text published by Lemerre: *Oeuvre poétique complète de Renée Vivien (1877-1910)*, ed. and preface Jean-Paul Goujon (Paris: Régine Deforges, 1986). This volume contains *Etudes et préludes* (1901), *Cendres et poussières* (1902), *Evocations* (1903), *Sapho* (1903), *La Vénus des aveugles* (1904), *Les Kitharèdes* (1904), *A l'heure des mains jointes* (1906), *Sillages* (1908), *Flambeaux éteints* (1907), *Dans un coin de violettes* (1910), *Le vent des vaisseaux* (1910), *Haillons* (1910). In addition to her poetry, Vivien published one novel, two collections of prose poems, a collection of short stories, and a biography of Anne Bolyn which she left unfinished.

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