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French Studies: A Quarterly Review, Volume 60, Number 3, July 2006,
pp. 335-346 (Article)

Published by Oxford University Press



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BREASTS ARE BACK! COLETTE'S CRITIQUE OF FLAPPER FASHION

ANNE FREADMAN

Abstract

This paper focuses on Colette's writing for the periodical press, particularly her writing on fashion, and sets out to discuss it in terms of its capacity to effect the high purposes of satire. Its method of reading is contextualizing, rather than immanent — it brings it into relation with a number of issues on which it bears: the history of fashion, the history of the body, generational change, the visual determinants of the fashions of the early twentieth century. Although humour is prominent, Colette is not content merely to make jokes. Ancient satire, which derives from the rhetoric of praise and blame, is the source of literary and art criticism, and Colette borrows both its modes and its vocation to elevate fashion writing to the level of cultural critique. Moralistic, it teaches something about social mores by making fun of them. Hence, Colette makes us laugh at the fact that fashion affects not only clothes, but bodies; style fashions the body and hence the self.

In comparison with the fiction, Colette's journalistic output has attracted relatively little interest among scholars of her work. Notable exceptions are David H. Walker's book on the *fait divers*, and Diana Holmes's introductory study.¹ There are also those whose focus is the women's press or women journalists in the early part of the twentieth century,² but this quasi-sociological approach is unlikely in the nature of the case to yield readings of the texts. A recent — notable — example of the literary disinterest to which I allude can be found in Julia Kristeva's recent work on Colette: following several paragraphs to Colette's work at *Le Matin*, Kristeva sums up the relation of Colette's journalistic work to her literary art: 'Cet art percutant de la saisie du détail s'épanouit aussi et tout particulièrement dans ses portraits, chroniques et autres notules journalistiques ou théâtrales, qui proposent non pas un jugement politique ou esthétique, mais une captation à la fois dramatique et généreuse de l'autre.'³ This passage occurs in the biographical chapter of Kristeva's study; the only other substantial mention of the journalism consists in the incorrect claim that Colette 'invented' the interview.

¹ David H. Walker, *Outrage and Insight: Modern French Writers and the fait divers* (Oxford—Washington, Berg, 1995); Diana Holmes, *Colette* (London, Macmillan, 1991).

² For example, Elisabeth Gillet, 'La collaboration de Colette aux journaux des années 1900', *Cahiers Colette*, 15 (1993), 172–81.

³ *Le Génie féminin*, tome III, *Colette* (Paris, Fayard, 2002), p. 142

It may be that the kind of reading required for documentary writing is somewhat different from that required for fiction. But exactly what kind is the question. Walker's is one answer, in that it undertakes to study the literary transformation of the genre of the *fait divers*. The answer I propose develops this suggestion for fashion writing: what did Colette do with materials that were more often handled by what she herself calls 'house publicists' than by serious critics? Her writing is so subtle, her capacity for observation and 'thick description' so highly developed, that we can expect to find in it a use of *ekphrasis* that goes well beyond the soliciting of sales. Notwithstanding her somewhat dismissive attitude to these *notules*, Kristeva does give an indication of what is interesting about them: *la saisie du détail ... une captation ... de l'autre*. If this is so, Colette in this mode is an entirely different matter from the egocentric subject presented by so many of the literary critics. In her journalism — this is an imprecise word, inadequate to its variety — we find a Colette engaged with the world in which she lives. This engagement was attenuated as she aged, its material conditions definitively disabled when she was crippled by arthritis — hence the poignancy of a title such as *Paris de ma fenêtre*. But in her younger years it was out and about, in the streets and in the shops, in the cafés and the music-halls, touching base at home only *pour mieux sauter*. It was led by a wide-ranging curiosity and a seriousness of purpose belied by the constant humour that accompanies it. Colette, I think, was one of the great observers of the experience of modernity, and in particular, of the experience of modernity for women.⁴

It is an experience of the body, its clothing, its food and modes of sociality,⁵ its ways of occupying space and time. Colette's critique of flapper fashion should be read within this broader framework, although it can be read more narrowly as a contribution to fashion history. For reasons contingent on the general neglect of her journalism, she is often overlooked in the recent work on fashion. Even Valerie Steele's book on Paris fashion refers to Proust at some length but not to Colette,⁶ yet I believe that she explored — and perhaps anticipated — some of the themes that have dominated research into fashion and dress since the 1970s. These themes, broadly, are the fashioning of the body and the

⁴ I use the term 'modernity' rather than 'modernism' so as to avoid the aesthetic restrictions of this latter. But I am conscious that the historical period to which I refer is far shorter than any serious use of the term 'modernity' would imply. Colette's preoccupation is indeed with 'style' and with fashion, but in her hands, style and fashion reach deeply into daily experience.

⁵ For a first foray into these matters, see my 'Eating Cultures', in *Consuming Culture: The Arts of the French Table*, ed. by John West-Sooby (University of Delaware Press, 2004), pp. 156–72.

⁶ *Paris Fashion: A Cultural History* (New York — Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1988). A noteworthy exception is a very scholarly historical article by Mary Lynn Stewart with Nancy Janovick, 'Slimming the Female Body? Re-evaluating Dress, Corsets, and Physical Culture in France, 1890s–1930s', *Fashion Theory*, 5:2 (2001), 173–93, which cites Colette's 'My Corset Maker', in *The Collected Stories of Colette*, ed. by R. Phelps (London, Penguin, 1988). I thank Margaret Maynard for bringing this article to my attention.

fashioning of subjectivity,⁷ the relation between fashion and the other visual arts,⁸ and women, modernity and the city.⁹ Unlike the house publicists with whom she contrasts herself, she joins her accounts of the aesthetic dimension of dress with a probing account of the history of femininity. It is in this that Colette's engagement in and with the world should matter to us. Nevertheless, it would be sad, not to say inadequate, to give too solemn an account of these topics. Colette is a critic in the classical sense, a fine practitioner of the rhetoric of praise and blame. Her mode is satire.

I derive the idea for my title from an article entitled 'Seins' published in 1924, which opens in this way:

Comment les-aimez-vous? En poire, en citron, en montgolfière, en demi-pomme, en cantaloup? Vous pouvez choisir, ne vous gênez pas. Vous croyiez qu'il n'y en avait plus, que leur compte était réglé, bien réglé, leur nom banni, leur turgescence, aimable ou indiscrete, morte et dégonflée ainsi que le cochon de baudruiche. Si vous parliez d'eux, c'était pour les maudire comme un errement du passé, une sorte d'hystérie collective, une épidémie des âges tombés dans la nuit, n'est-ce pas? Remettons, s'il vous plaît, Madame, les choses au point. Ils existent et persistent, pour condamnés et traqués qu'ils soient. Une vitalité sournoise est en eux, qui espèrent. 'L'an prochain à Jérusalem', murmurent, pendant les siècles des siècles, d'autres opprimés. Ceux de qui je parle chuchotent peut-être: 'L'an prochain dans les corsages ...'

Tout est possible, le pire paraît probable. Assez de ménagements! Sachez d'un coup toute la vérité: *il y a des seins!* Il y a des seins en poire, en citron, en demi-pomme ... (voir plus haut). L'anarchie monte, je lui souhaite le nom de soulèvement. Quoi, on refait le sein? Sur l'emplacement déserté des vôtres, Madame, je le jure. Vous voilà fraîche, comme on dit. On va reporter ces horreurs? On les reporte. Mieux, on les fabrique.¹⁰

The article continues in this vein, discussing what we used to call 'falsies', their shapes and sizes, but also their technical features and the advantages of one design over another. Colette has adopted the rhetoric of the sales pitch, and her apparent addressee is the hapless victim of fashion. To persuade her to change her body shape yet again, the writer runs the gamut of all the choices, each of which is more absurd than the last. Why not buy several styles, she suggests, treat your breasts as a fashion accessory. The satire is directed both at the fashion industry and its discourses but not, I believe, at the woman herself. For women have the inside knowledge that the writer is letting out of the bag. Colette is eliciting a laughter from them that disempowers the tyranny to which they are subject.

She is also, surely, breaking something of a taboo here by allowing women's underwear to be a matter of public culture. There is more to

⁷ See, for example, Joanne Entwistle, *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress, and Modern Social Theory*, (Cambridge, Polity, 2000); Elizabeth Wilson, 'Fashion and the Postmodern Body', in *Chic Thrills: a Fashion Reader*, ed. by Juliet Ash and Elizabeth Wilson (London, Pandora, 1992) pp. 3–16.

⁸ See, for example, Anne Hollander, *Seeing through Clothes* (Berkeley — Los Angeles — London, University of California Press, 1975).

⁹ See, for example, Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (London, Virago, 1985).

¹⁰ Colette, *Œuvres*, ed. by Claude Pichois, 4 vols (Paris, Gallimard, 1984–2001), II, 1152 (future references in text).

this laughter than the intimate giggle and the girlish joke might suggest. Literally commodified, women's bodies are being packaged and sold back to them, but, represented in a description close to grotesque, these breasts are an object of mockery, not of desire, bought only to be discarded. The pastiche of an advertising style inappropriate to its object turns the faint echo of music-hall humour and Belle Époque mores to the ends of cultural critique.

These, broadly speaking, are the means of Colette's humour, but its basis, I think, is the literalness of the premiss of her satire: breasts were to be dieted into oblivion for last season, and Colette writes as if this fashion rule actually succeeded.¹¹ Now we witness the return of the repressed in, what is more, a fashion industry bonanza: if you do not have any breasts left, we can do something about it. Designed in rubber and painted a delightful skin colour, you may find them lifeless: why not try this little tulle number, with an accommodating hole for the nipple? Moreover, for women who failed to fashion their bodies for last year, there is also a solution: any breast can be changed, filled out if it is too flat, rounded and lifted if it is pendulous, the whole body encased in a rubber tube to give you no more hip than a 'bouteille à vin du Rhin' ('Seins', II, 1153). There are fashions in bodies, Colette tells us elsewhere ('Mannequins', II, 1119); a woman's body is infinitely 'malleable' ('Nouveautés', II, 1159) — if you are required to be a sausage, then a sausage you will be ('Seins', II, 1154). However, we should be wary of treating this joke as if that was all it was. We are taught by Colette to see that dress reaches very deep into the flesh, that style fashions the body and hence the self.

In order to pursue my reading, I want to contextualize this article by relating it to some other essays by Colette. The significance of fashion, we discover immediately, is not confined to the fashion moment — the spring showings of 1924 as contrasted with the winter of 1923, for example. Colette saw herself as belonging to a transitional generation. Women of the 'banquet years' had been shaped with full breasts and hips, not only for the short-lived *forme en S*, but, like many generations before them, for the sake of representing their maternal vocation; if they adopted the 1920s look, they ended up like cylinders on legs.¹² Their daughters aspired to a prepubescent look with nothing 'lateral' — no hips, no behinds; their breasts merely suggested beneath their gauze and silk. Women with twenty-year-old daughters in the 1920s lived with a fashion that ruled against the resemblance of women across the generations.

¹¹ Stewart op.cit. is a historical revision of the standard view of 'couturiers and commentators' that also appears to take the image literally; her work focuses mainly on corsetry.

¹² 'Cylindre' and 'saucisson' are the metaphors she adopts in 'Seins'; elsewhere she refers to 'tuyaux', 'fourreaux' and 'tubes' to describe the dresses women were expected to adapt themselves to. The cylinder metaphor is given its credentials by the photographs — as distinct from the graphic art — of the fashionable society ladies that can be seen from time to time in the pages of *Vogue*.

Mothers no longer recognized themselves in their daughters, nor daughters in their mothers, and in dialogue with a ‘young friend’ of the flapper set, Colette wonders wistfully which of them her daughter will resemble.

Je t’aime bien — avec curiosité. Tu m’aimes bien — avec une certaine ironie. Est-ce que ma fille te ressemblera? Est-ce qu’il lui faudra, dans six ou sept ans, se conformer au code de beauté qui te tient sous ses durs statuts? Repoussera-t-elle la poularde aux marrons et l’entremets sucré en pensant à ses seins ... (‘À une jeune femme’, III, 783)

The adolescent body is maintained, Colette tells us, at some cost. It involves an ascetic discipline that entails a radical shift in the very form of social relations; young women sacrifice the sensual pleasure — this includes their delight in fine food — and the sexual confidence of the womanly woman, but at the same time lose the *joie de vivre* of the adolescent they are trying to resemble.

This discontinuity of the generations was a radical moment indeed, but, notwithstanding the major changes in middle-class women’s lives that followed the Great War, it would be misleading to suppose a simple linear history of women’s bodies:¹³ before was buxom and physically inactive, after was slim and sporty. Indeed, Colette herself registers the complexity of cultural time: ‘Je ne suis pas à la page — à ta page’ (‘À une jeune femme’, III, 783). In the advertising material from the press of the Belle Époque, we discover that twenty or thirty years before the flapper era, there were two equal and opposite fears for women: *êtes-vous obèse?* one advertisement would ask, showing an engraved image of a hefty matron with a shelf of bosom obscuring her sight of the ground she walked on; and *êtes-vous trop maigre?* another would ask, showing a miserable cadaverous specimen with no breasts at all, stooped and worn down by her domestic duties. Note the choice of adjective in each case: both states required remedy, both were equally unattractive, both were signs of present or impending ill-health. For Colette, whose own body had been fashioned by the rule that underpinned those adjectives, the flapper has already begun to resemble ‘too thin’, and she speaks to her young friend — for whom the rule is to *rester maigre, ou le devenir* (III, 783) — from the position of ‘comfortably fat’.

In Colette’s descriptions of the fashioned body of the 1920s, we find echoes of the concern with both these body types. She refers indirectly to the matronly form with any number of satirical descriptions of flat-chested models — ‘la gorge en steppe de la Péri’ (‘Trop court’, II, 1138), for example, ‘le relief faible de ses deux petites mamelles’ (‘En dessous’, II, 1143) for another. ‘Nul mamelon’, she laments, as she responds to her young friend’s rule against having ‘un derrière qui bombe’ by making fun of her: ‘Et que veux-tu donc qu’il fasse, le malheureux, le reprouvé?’

¹³ See Stewart, ‘Slimming the Female Body’, for this argument.

(‘À une jeune femme’, III, 783) The unyielding rule is ‘Rien qui dépasse!’ (‘Seins’, II, 1153). In order to help women conform to this injunction, rubber tubing and the extraordinary inventiveness of corsetry ensured that where diet and patent medicines failed, the female form could still be disciplined into the tubular shape required by the waistless tunic. But where ‘too fat’ required constraint and compression, ‘too thin’ was simply reinterpreted. No longer referring to a woman ageing before her time, the ‘thin’ body becomes ‘slim’, acquiring an erect posture and youthful vitality; it is captured as it were eternally at the threshold of sexual maturity before the deposit of womanly fats on the hips and the breasts.

Here is a third fragment of context, which again shows Colette concerned with the styling of the body for the fashions of the day. ‘Trop court’ starts by noting that women are under-represented in the ranks of the Grand Couturiers (‘Elles sont minorité, minorité d’une qualité rare, et qui gagne des sièges rapidement, mais minorité’), and she attributes to the domination of the profession by men the fact that the modern styles pay little heed to the way women move, to their quotidian needs. Once again, she scolds, this year’s fashions are too short; it is as if the length of the skirt somehow sums up all these failures.

J’ai déjà vu, en un mois, défiler deux cents robes. C’est, à l’aube d’une saison, un défilé qui instruit, en amusant. J’ai appris comment on porte cette année le ventre, qui conserve, bien que plat, une arrogance de bouclier et se balance d’avant en arrière, d’arrière en avant. Où est le roulis de hanches espagnol ou martiniquais, des mannequins de 1914? Il s’agit bien de hanches! Nous n’avons plus rien de latéral. J’y appris que ‘la taille remonte’, elle remonte, ma foi, jusqu’au nombril, en fait elle ne se gêne pas pour descendre plus bas, beaucoup plus bas. Aussi la longueur du dos épouvante, si j’appelle dos ce parallélogramme plat, au bas duquel pend une jupe qui suffirait à une fillette de dix ans. ‘Trois pouces de jambes et le dos tout de suite.’ Ah! Ce dos! Quatre-vingts centimètres de dos, sans pinces ni pli. (‘Trop court’, II, 1139)

Contrast this with the bottoms and hips of a Picasso. Nothing lateral, no stomach; the body is being sculpted by the dress-designers to achieve an abstraction like that of Brancusi or even Modigliani. There is simply no room for an abdomen. Instead, the back-and-forth motion of the stomach treats it as a simple hinge, with the legs attached directly to the back. Dresses like this, writes Colette, are unfinished business, novels without endings, idylls with no poetry, the bodies in them like plucked ostriches. Abstracted from its fleshly body, femininity has become an entirely visual affair.

This takes us into the realm of Anne Hollander’s argument concerning the visual determinants of the fashions of the early twentieth century. ‘It is not enough,’ she writes, ‘to say that women adopted short skirts after the First World War because they symbolized sexual freedom and

permitted easy movement of the legs, since these practical and symbolic effects could have been accomplished in different ways.¹⁴ We must take into account the way pictorial art creates the desire for certain forms and the capacity to see them in certain ways. Thus, the dress designs of Paul Poiret can be said to be the material realization of the ‘crisp or sinuous flat patterns of the new illustrative styles’.¹⁵ More generally, ‘the rise of abstract art and decorative design permitted the citizens of Western Europe to accustom their eyes to visions of themselves as shapes’.¹⁶ In order to make this argument, Hollander traces the evolution both of fashion photography and of fashion drawing, showing how ‘spontaneity of look’ preceded ‘instantaneity of image’.¹⁷ Their effects converged: ‘the new photography and the new mode in decorative art were in fact the newly wedded parents of the new fashions’.¹⁸ As a result of this, ‘the quick impression, the captured instant’ became ‘the new test of elegance’.¹⁹ She concludes by claiming that ‘the ideal simplified shape of a sleek body was now not only indicated by the trend of abstract graphic design but confirmed on film. Since that time, women have had to be slender’.²⁰

Yet it is not the case, as Hollander seems to suggest,²¹ that photography and film work in the same ways, with the latter just a moving version of the former. We need to consider the differences between different scopic regimes that emerge or converge at the same period. As in the theatre, the body in film is the site of narrative tension, the performance — the action and passion — of emotion; yet, like the body of photography and unlike that of the theatre, the body in film is a creature of two dimensions with no substance and no density. Colette herself was intrigued by this phenomenon, and is reported as having dreamt of making a film ‘où le caractère intime des personnages serait révélé par l’ombre projetée ... Je sais bien comment je m’y prendrais ...’.²² As with the music hall and the catwalk, she attends to the gap between the actress and her image, noting in the film actresses she observes:

une sorte de fanatisme amoureux, qu’elles vouent à ces ‘doubles’ mystérieux, noirs et blancs, détachés d’elles-mêmes par le miracle cinématographique, libres à jamais, complets, surprenants, plus pleins de vie qu’elles-mêmes, et qu’elles contemplant en créatrices humbles, parfois ravies, souvent étonnées, toujours un peu irresponsables.²³

¹⁴ *Seeing through Clothes*, p. 313.

¹⁵ *Seeing through Clothes*, p. 334.

¹⁶ *Seeing through Clothes*, p. 336.

¹⁷ *Seeing through Clothes*, p. 333.

¹⁸ *Seeing through Clothes*, p. 334.

¹⁹ *Seeing through Clothes*, p. 332.

²⁰ *Seeing through Clothes*, p. 338.

²¹ *Seeing through Clothes*, pp. 327ff.

²² *Colette au cinéma: chroniques, dialogues, scénarios*, ed. by Alain et Odette Virmaux (Paris, Flammarion, 1975), p. 291.

²³ *Colette au cinéma*, p. 285.

Indeed, the cinema was not merely a scopic regime; a new way of telling stories, it both theatricalizes the body and narrates it. I do not mean merely that the body is a vehicle for narrative, but that thanks to the temporality of its making as well as to the materiality of its images, film can tell stories of bodies as such. It is in this that it differs both from graphic art and from photography. This is what Stanley Cavell calls 'film's power of metamorphosis or transfiguration'.²⁴ and likewise in the theatres of fashion, on the catwalks and in the salons, where the narrative embodied by an individual model as she disappears backstage then reappears is a story of multiple transformations achieved by changes of costume. The capacity for such transformation was exactly what the narratives of fashion were promising. A mannequin's job is not merely to display the clothes, but to abstract her body to the point where a woman in the audience, a potential client, dreams the dream of transfiguration, her body in those clothes, her very self become insubstantial. Unseduced and undeluded, Colette attends to body of the model as well as to the bodies that dream that dream. But if the filmic body intrigues her through its separation of the actress from her moving image, that is film, and this is fashion, where what is at stake is the relation between the bodies and the clothes. These transformations are bought at the cost of considerable discomfort. It is here that Colette's critique leads in a direction not adumbrated by Hollander's descriptive history of the clothes alone.

Earlier I alluded to the art of sculpture in order to gesture towards the extent to which Colette's critique relies on a three-dimensional apprehension of the body; in her work, this business of making an appearance is an art of the voluminous body in space. Nevertheless, she is also interested in the aesthetics of the dress-objects as such. Indeed, what is remarkable about Colette's fashion writing is precisely that she investigates the intrication of surface detail not only with cut but with the redesign of the body, its stylized postures and gestures, its physical competencies. I take it that this intrication is the point where the aesthetics of dress and the culture of the body cannot be separated. Nor can this point be disintricated from the economics of the fashion trade. Turning away from the Grand Couturier, Colette attends to his colleagues, the embroiderer and the textile maker. A flat, rectangular space without tucks and pleats, the exaggerated back is an opportunity for their arts to flourish.

Monsieur le Brodeur, souriez: voici de quoi vous ébattre. Brodez, sur ce dos vertigineux, des pagodes, des fruits, des chiffres arabes, des scènes champêtres, des frises pompéiennes et des automobiles. Mais vous souriez jaune, Brodeur? Il y a de quoi. Le Tisseur, qui a du génie, s'est mis dans l'idée qu'il se passerait de vous, et il tisse à miracle. En relief, en creux, soyeuse, rêche, versicolore, pâle comme l'ombre d'une fumée, vigoureuse comme celle

²⁴ *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* (University of Chicago Press, 1996) p. 122.

d'un feuillage d'été sur une allée, il projette sur toute étoffe l'arabesque, et vous défie. Débrouillez-vous, Brodeur, et inventez, vous aussi. ('Trop court', II, 1139)²⁵

Again we find the exaggeration, both on her part and on that of the crafts she is describing, that opens her work to satire and the objects she describes to self-parody: from pagodas and arabesques to the friezes and motor cars that echo the rectangularity of the back itself, the designs are lavish and luxuriant, not to say excessive. Colette is, of course, not the first critic to note that the radical simplification of dress design in the 1920s was, as it were, compensated by rich fabric and profuse embroidery, that femininity was not eradicated with the flattening of hips and breasts, but reinvested in the surface of the body. What interests me is the juxtaposition of her remarks about the three-dimensional body with this description of the back's use as a flat pictorial space, and the denial of the volumes of the body with a resort to drapery. We do not see these women in profile, for they have nothing that sticks out; we see them from the front, where rectangularity is softened by long strings of pearls, we see them from the back where the female frame is used as the frame of a picture.

Colette's description of the flapper body in its pictorial dresses suggests, therefore, the erasure of sculpture from the aesthetics of the fashion industry at this time. It has also led me to read these fashions in the context of the cinematic image. For graphic art renounces the illusion of realistic representation, where the cinema insists upon it. I recall the coincidence in time of these fashions with the rise of the feature film and the rise of the star system. If Hollander reminds us that line-drawing and the new photography turn flesh into figure, Cavell reminds us that Hollywood was responsible not merely for a new image of the female body, but for a new imagination of it and of its capacity for transfiguration. Likewise, I suggest, in the new fashions with their reliance on line and shape instead of volume, it is as if the fantasy creature of the screen could be translated back onto the flesh, as if the task of the dress designer was to effect the transubstantiation of his client. If so, the dress designers have been taken in by the fiction of bodies on which the cinema relies.²⁶ It is Colette with her descriptions of the image body who makes me think so, and her descriptions of the underwear required for these fashions that explode the fiction for her readers. For a body that is dressed for an exclusively scopic regime is a body without substance; this substance is apprehended by the senses of taste and smell and touch, and repressed by an exclusive reliance in the gaze.

²⁵ Colette's descriptions of textiles have the capacity to mimic the luxuriance of their objects. See also 'Soieries', II, 1175–79.

²⁶ A crucial fact for Colette in this regard would be that there is no 'envers' of the screen image — hence her interest in engaging with film actresses under the physical conditions of the shoot. Several pieces in *Colette au cinéma* register this interest.

So let us return to Colette's backless dresses with their drapery to note that they cannot be worn with brassieres, and are designed for a body that needs no rubber tubing. What kind of underwear is needed to carry them off? In a piece entitled 'En dessous' we find the answer to this question, and again Colette allies her satire to nostalgia for the passing of a certain style of femininity. For the most part, this piece is written from the point of view of the salon manager who has to take her, Madame Colette, into a backroom for her fitting because the fitting-rooms are smelly. The problem is caused by women who try on their new dresses 'naked':

Que voulez-vous, Madame! Autrefois la femme portait du linge, du beau linge de fil qui lui essuyait la peau; à présent, quand elle quitte sa robe en la retournant comme un lapin qu'on dépouille, vous voyez quoi? Un coureur pédestre, Madame, en petit caleçon. Un mitron en tenue de fournil. Ni chemise, ni pantalon de linge, ni jupon, ni combinaison, quelquefois un soutien-gorge — souvent un soutien-gorge ... Avant de venir à l'essayage, ces dames ont marché, dansé, goûté, transpiré ... et je m'arrête là ... Il est loin, leur bain du matin! Et leur robe de deux mille balles? Le combat de boxe, madame, et le championnat d'escrime! '*Douzième round*, parfum troublant' ... Ah! Dieux! ('En dessous', II, 1145)

On cue, the mannequin arrives for the showing, her two little breasts outlined by the skin-coloured evening dress. The joke, of course, is on the salon manager, for the styles she is advertising require diminutive matching silk knickers and camisole. As the dress comes off, a moment in the history of femininity is revealed.

Colette's disapproval of the reduction in women's intimate apparel has at least one element in common with her rebuke to the corsetiers: it has to do with body odour. A body that does not separate its skin from the fabric of the dress does not keep its smells to itself. As such, it is an antisocial body, just as the flappers themselves have sacrificed sociality to visual style. This body, now actively running around town all day, spreads its smells throughout the fitting-rooms of the dress salon. Likewise, although the new regime in corsetry may hide the bulges instead of exaggerating them, it retrieves exactly what women had expected to be liberated from when they threw off their whalebone and laces.

En même temps qu'un lent étouffement accélère les battements de votre coeur et rougit votre joue, goûtez les plaisirs subtils d'une transpiration odorante, qui emprunte au caoutchouc pur sa base sulfureuse, au corps humain son acidité ... Je ne vous en dis pas plus Adoptez, Madame, ce cilice élastique. Vous verrez qu'il sert et la mode et la vertu. ('Seins', II, 1154)

Fainting and the vapours no longer beset these vigorous young bodies, because the rubber tube no longer squeezes the ribcage and compresses the lung capacity of its wearer. Nevertheless, the visual account of women's fashions leaves unspoken its other physical and sensory effects. Colette the sensualist blows its cover, at the same time showing us why the egocentric reading of her focus on the sensual dimension of bodily experience is simply inadequate to an account of her project as a writer. She is concerned with bodies in the world, and this is a social matter.

Underwear is not a private affair, she tells us; it is part of our capacity to enter into and maintain our social, as well as our sexual, relations.

All clothing — *dessus* as well as *dessous* — mediates the relations of our bodies with the world around them. Colette is scathing about the outfit type called the ‘costume trotteur’. This designates a suit worn for shopping and other daywear, but its name has to do with walking in a business-like manner in the street. The name, she says, is an antiphrasis, because the one thing you cannot do in this costume is trot. Its skirt is so tight around the legs that it pulls the knees together and wears out your stockings, not to mention impeding your gait.

Va pour le costume-trotteur, ainsi nommé par antiphrase, pour ce que sa jupe bride la jambe, rapproche les genoux, use les bas et entrave la marche. Écourté, il donne à la femme immobile un joli petit air alerte, qu’elle perd si elle se met en marche — mais quel besoin de se mettre en marche? Le ‘costume-trotteur’ élégant ne trotte pas. Si nous voulons trotter, à pied, à cheval, ou gravir la montagne. Ou passer à gué le marais, ce n’est pas à vous, Courturier, que nous avons affaire, mais à des spécialistes que vous dédaignez, des techniciens de la gabardine imperméable, de la bande molletière, de la bottine à ski, de la culotte Saumur. Votre costume-trotteur, à vous, fait quatre cents mètres entre midi et une heure, et c’est bien assez pour le délicat chevreau ajouré que votre complice le *chausneur*, nomme soulier du matin. (‘Trop court’, II, 1137–38)

Colette’s focus here is with the practical requirements of a modern woman’s life getting about her business in the streets of Paris or engaging in precisely those outdoor activities that had transformed ‘too thin’ into a strong and vigorous body. In the same way as the rubber tube, the short skirt is, therefore, a cultural contradiction, abstracting from the old-fashioned womanly body only to make its contemporary replacement an impossibility.

This impossibility is pointed up not only by Colette’s ‘jeune femme’ with her flapper mores, drinking and smoking and abstaining from solid food, but also by the mannequins who are used by the *grands couturiers* to model their clothes. Such modelling is a representational practice that was acquiring considerable art, indeed artifice, during the flapper period. In the hands of the *grands couturiers*, the young women who lent themselves to this practice were moulded by a stringent discipline. Far from the image of newly healthy, sporting vitality that so often appears in the advertisements for clothes in this period, the models themselves were subject to neurasthenic mood swings and losses of energy. And why would this be? Colette puts the following set of instructions into the mouth of a designer addressing the young women whom he pretends are his *collaboratrices* but who are, in Colette’s view, deprived of control of their own bodies:

Ceci est ton domaine, tu n’iras pas plus loin. Dispose de ce salon, de cette galerie, pour ta promenade de fauve. Va, reviens, retourne-t’en, reviens encore. Demi-nue, tu ne connaîtras pas le froid, sauf à l’heure où, retirée des regards, tu te sentiras loin d’eux frissonnante. Prends garde que nous te voulons, cette année, dépourvue d’une chair

douillette, et dure comme une championne. Mais tu ne peux te livrer à aucun sport, donc mange le moins possible, et ne t'amuse pas à acheter des marrons grillés au coin de la rue.' ('Mannequins', II, 1118–19)

These rules sum up the problem associated with the fashioning of the body in the generation of young people of the 1920s. 'Abreuvées de café, privées de l'occupation manuelle qui règle le battement de coeur et rythme la pensée', these young models are images of a body that is not theirs; it is only they who, prisoners of the luxury of the designer's salon, do not have to face the practical difficulties that Colette discerns for its clients. The mannequins themselves are abstractions. Taken together with the ladies described by the salon manager, they mobilize a clear opposition between the scopic regime of high fashion and the physical, sensorial business of the body in the clothes.

By contrast with the clients, the models are purely visual creatures, always already representations of a body that, in its practical conditions, is voluminous, tactile and olfactory.²⁷ They are isolated and asocial. It is simply not the case that, for them, clothes are the mediators of the intimate body with the social world around it. Colette's concern with underwear as well as outerwear puts a particular spin on this insight. The clients — women of the world — are relational bodies, with no essence but the network of varied relationships in which they are intricately. It is for this reason that subjectivity is modified by the modification of the body's vestimentary mediations. Colette spends much of her writing energy apparently making fun of the outcome, but I want to conclude by interrogating the reason for her satire. As I have mentioned, I believe that one of the important things that Colette did with her journalistic writing was to chronicle the history of femininity. However, in her practice, this history is not a chronologically arranged series of stylistic episodes. It is an analysis of the deep points of contradiction involved in the available ways of being in the world. These contradictions are revealed by what conceals them: rubber tubing and minimal lingerie, stringent dietary practices and falsies, ungoverned body odour and a kind of amnesia of all but the scopic dimension of self-presentation. Above all, the spatially and physically, not to say socially and culturally, mobile body of the 'New Woman' was both freed and constricted by her clothes, as the new energies needed by women were frustrated by dietary practices that could not sustain them. It is satire that points to these contradictions, as the contradictions in turn point to a body in crisis. In Colette's hands, the history of femininity is a history of such moments.

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²⁷ It is also gustatory, as Colette points out with some glee in 'Fards', II, 1145–48.