In her lifetime, and for many decades after her death, Colette occupied a ‘median position’ (André, 2000, 15) in the French literary field: betwixt and between, in Woolf’s phrase, belonging neither to the high literary canon of her era nor to the ranks of the simply popular. Her brilliance and originality as a crafter of French prose were certainly recognised, and with the publication of one of her greatest novels, *Chéri* in 1920, she was even praised by the masters of French modernism, notably Proust and Gide, the latter declaring himself ‘toujours étonné du si grand plaisir que j’ai pris à vous lire’ (Colette, 1986, 1547; ‘amazed by the great pleasure I have taken in reading you’) in a letter to Colette. If the book’s quality was, for Gide, unexpected, this was because of the yawning gap between himself, ‘maître à penser d’une revue d’avant-garde dont toute la démarche littéraire est inscrite dans une logique de prestige’ (the recognised intellectual authority of a highly prestigious avant-garde journal’) and a Colette ‘aux débuts passablement scandaleux’ (‘whose early days were fairly scandalous’) and whose ‘logique’ was decidedly more commercial (André, 2000, 30). Colette had few intellectual credentials, was perhaps best known for her colourful private life, and appealed to a large – and, worse still, female – popular readership. However well she wrote, she did not fit the image of a serious writer. Marie-Odile André has shown how Colette was nonetheless legitimised from the later 1920s on by inclusion in the French school curriculum, but at the cost of being sanitised as essentially a writer on nature and animals, so that generations of French readers first encountered her as the source of tryingly difficult

passages for dictation or stylistic analysis. Her image in France, and thus elsewhere, fluctuated between scandal and bowdlerised respectability, until second-wave feminist critics from the 1970s recognised in her a rare and radical feminine voice, though one who still fell awkwardly outside the master narrative of French literary history.

Since feminist work on Colette has been at pains to point out that she is as challengingly original in style and moral vision as her celebrated male contemporaries, it may seem perverse to wish to confirm her now as middlebrow. But my point is this: Colette managed the very unusual feat of writing as a modernist, in terms of challenging themes, experimental style and play with genre, whilst simultaneously remaining accessible to a very large, devoted and non-intellectual readership. She was middlebrow in the sense of bridging the élite and popular ends of the literary spectrum. None of her great contemporaries such as Proust, Gide or Valéry achieved this – or indeed even sought to do so. Nor of course did any of them lay down their pens to go and dance semi-naked on a music-hall stage, or write columns for the mainstream press that mixed handy recipes with exquisitely crafted stories.

A middlebrow career begins: the Claudine cycle

Colette always insisted that she suffered from no burning ambition to be a writer, but fell into writing because she happened to marry Willy, that literary entrepreneur of the Belle Époque. The story is well known of how Willy belatedly recognised the marketable talents of his young wife, and set her to work on the assembly line of subcontracted authors published under his signature. The Claudine series was a success beyond his wildest dreams, spawning adaptations for the stage, spin-off commodities (perfume, ‘Claudine’ collars, cigarette holders …) and welcome publicity for their supposed author. When the first, _Claudine à l’école_ (1900) proved so profitable, Colette was immediately put to work on the sequel _Claudine à Paris_ (1901), in which the heroine leaves her village schooldays behind for Paris and falls in love with the handsome Renaud, then _Claudine en ménage_ (1902), dealing with her married life. In _Claudine s’en va_ (1903), the narrative voice passes to a new character, Annie, and Claudine appears as a secondary protagonist. Claudine’s story concludes with _La Retraite sentimentale_ in 1907, published under the name Colette Willy and coinciding with the end of her creator’s marriage. Sales of the Claudine books were phenomenal: according to
the scholarly Pléiade edition of Colette’s work, their success ‘au sens quantitatif et commercial du mot, l’un des plus grands, sinon le plus grand, de toute la littérature française’ (I, lxvii; ‘in the quantitative, commercial sense of the word, was one of the greatest, if not the greatest, of the whole of French literature’). Thus it is safe to assume that beyond Willy’s habitual target audience of male fans of erotica, the Claudine novels reached a wide cross-class readership of both sexes. The reasons for their success both connect Colette to her widely read female contemporaries and establish a relationship with readers that would underpin Colette’s whole writing career.

With Claudine, Colette created a heroine to suit the age, a ‘girl for today’ as Roger Vadim would describe Brigitte Bardot in the 1950s (quoted in Bernert, 1991, 1086). Claudine is the passionate, irreverent, self-willed product of the contradictions besetting the lives of Belle Époque women: she has precursors in Gyp’s Chiffon (Le Mariage de Chiffon, 1894) and Tinayre’s Hellé (1898), both outspoken ingénues who oppose dominant views of women’s subaltern role with a firm belief in their own right to self-determination, yet for whom a happy ending is still synonymous with marriage. Claudine too combines contestation with romance, but in a manner that is at once more entertaining and more subversive. As a beneficiary of the free state schooling introduced for both sexes by the Third Republic (1881), Colette’s heroine (unlike her predecessors) is representative of the more popular end of Belle Époque readership, the affluent bourgeoisie on the whole continuing to prefer a private, often Catholic education for their daughters. On the one hand, Claudine provides a caustically irreverent view of the école républicaine, with its solemn emphasis on patriotism, the work ethic and the ideal of the virtuous wife and mother: ‘O Bérillon!’ she apostrophises the author of one piously republican textbook on La bonne ménagère agricole (The Good Country Housewife), ‘que tu as amusé ces sales petites filles, dont j’étais!’ (Claudine à l’école, I, 265; ‘how you made us laugh, all those rude little girls of whom I was one’). She depicts its agents with gleeful disrespect, from schoolmistresses to regional inspectors to the Minister

2 All references to Colette’s work are to the Pléaide edition in four volumes – thus Roman numeral references are to the volume number.

3 Like Bardot’s star persona, composed of both the actress and the roles she played on-screen, Claudine became a role model for young French women, who imitated her dress, short hair (Colette herself cut her long hair in 1902) and ‘gamine’ style.
of Education himself, described on his official visit to Claudine’s school as a ‘rogue petit monsieur à ventre de bouvreuil’ (Claudine à l’école, I, 200; ‘a cross little man with a stomach like a bullfinch’). Yet at the same time, as Patricia Tilburg (2009) has shown, like her creator, Claudine remains thoroughly imbued with the values that informed her education: she retains the active spirit of enquiry, the belief in the value of hard work and self-improvement, the pursuit of physical fitness (in mens sana corpore sano) that the school, for all her mockery, taught her. Thus, at a time when the avant-garde largely despised the republican discourse of democracy, scientific progress, shared endeavour and self-improvement, Claudine spoke to the generation that had benefited from these secular ideals. The post-school Claudine approaches life in Paris with an investigative energy and a secure sense of her own integrity (she responds to a casual grope from a male passer-by with a swift umbrella blow to the head) that correspond to the school’s emphasis on mental enquiry and personal agency. In a sense, this is further confirmed by Claudine’s characteristic tone of humorous scepticism: as Tilburg argues, republican schooling may have been intended to produce dutiful republican wives and mothers, but its emphasis on academic achievement, secular democracy and rational enquiry was helpfully at odds with its overt lessons on gender.

Claudine’s confident sense of her own agency is rendered in part through her distinctive voice, for throughout the first three volumes, and in La Retraite sentimentale, she is the sole narrator of her own story. The narrative takes the form of Claudine’s journal, the keeping of which also answers the imperative, learned at school, to interrogate, understand and record experience. At the opening of Claudine à Paris, she explains, ‘Il va falloir, pour l’honneur de mes cahiers, que je raconte pourquoi j’ai quitté Montigny’ (I, 221; ‘For the honour of this journal, I will have to recount why I left Montigny’), and Claudine en ménage begins with a critical review of the heroine’s recent past: ‘Tâchons de mettre un peu d’ordre dans cette salade de souvenirs’ (I, 380; ‘Let’s try and put a bit of order into this muddle of memories’). Like many personal diaries, Claudine’s assumes an undefined but significant

4 Working from contemporary documents such as the 1887 Dictionnaire de pédagogie, Tilberg shows how pupils of the republican school – including, quite explicitly, girls – were taught to combine observation with judgement and independent thought, and thus to develop into well-informed secular subjects equipped with ‘refined, fortified individual judgment and will’ (2009, 60).
addressee, who here corresponds to the reader of Colette’s text, exhorted to ‘Écoutez plutôt’ (Claudine à Paris, I, 222; ‘Now listen’). The imagined reader justifies the ordering of memories, the self-interrogation on the meaning of experience, the attempts to articulate and explain feelings and impressions. And Claudine is largely a reliable narrator: if she misreads a situation or misjudges a person (as in her failure to recognise Renaud’s self-interested complicity in her lesbian affair with Rézi in Claudine en ménage), it is she who will discover and rectify this, rather than allow the reader to transcend her perspective.

Unlike Tinayre’s Hellé or Rebelle, for example, the Claudine novels provide no wise heroes who can help to hone the heroine’s moral judgement. Claudine’s beloved father is an erudite malacologist, comically ill-equipped to deal with human life as opposed to that of the molluscs he studies. If Claudine herself recognises in her attraction to the older, sophisticated Renaud an element of desire for a substitute father – ‘À cause de ce noble père, plutôt lunatique, qui est le mien, j’ai besoin d’un papa, d’un ami, d’un amant’ (Claudine à Paris, I, 362; ‘Because of this noble but somewhat mad father of mine, I need a papa, a friend, a lover’) – she also soon recognises Renaud’s limitations, notably his ‘incurable et séduisante frivolité’ (Claudine en ménage, I, 414; ‘incurable and enchanting frivolity’) that leaves her, morally, on her own. The sole moral compass in the Claudine novels is Claudine herself. And through the secondary characters of her schoolmates, Colette also sketches in the material realities of women’s lives in the Belle Époque that make Claudine’s indomitable conviction of her own agency both exceptional and salutary. Unlike most of the girls who attended local state schools, Claudine enjoys the privileges of money and class. For her friends, the daughters ‘d’épiciers, de cultivateurs, de gendarmes et d’ouvriers’ (Claudine à l’école, 1,10; ‘of grocers, farmers, policemen and labourers’), the height of post-school ambition is to enter the École Normale and become primary teachers, a life that Colette’s novels, like those of her contemporary Gabrielle Reval, depict as underpaid and incompatible with marriage or family. Alternatively, like Claudine’s classmate Luce, girls of slender means may escape domestic drudgery by selling their bodies. Luce’s story acts as a grim doubling of Claudine’s own: she too comes to Paris and embarks on a sexual relationship with a

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5 Reval (1870–1938) was herself a teacher and the author of novels, such as Sévriennes (1900), which dramatised both the hardships and the satisfactions of training and working as a woman teacher under the Third Republic.
much older relative (Renaud is Claudine’s uncle by marriage). In Luce’s case, however, the uncle is a physically repellent man with an unsavoury taste for young girls, and she pays dearly for the creature comforts he provides. Claudine’s romance is thus shadowed by a darker reminder of the real limitations on women’s lives, and the difficulty of achieving the relative autonomy that Claudine represents. The story of Annie, imprisoned in her marriage to an affluent, respectable and domineering husband in Claudine s’en va, also confirms Claudine as a rebel against the normal female lot of her generation.

Like her near contemporaries Lesueur and Tinayre, Colette combines a critical view of her society’s sexual politics with an upbeat portrayal of modernity focalised from a female perspective. Claudine takes full advantage of the relative freedom and mobility offered by the modern city, shocking her conservative aunt by travelling unchaperoned on foot or by public transport, attending theatres and concerts, and soon mingling – thanks to Renaud’s connections – with the more bohemian end of fashionable society, where the sexes mix freely. Indeed, the sketches of many famous personalities of the day, writers, artists and eccentric socialites like Willy himself, lightly fictionalised as Renaud’s friend Maugis, probably added the pleasures of the gossip magazine to the novels’ many sources of appeal. The milieu which Colette depicts from Claudine à Paris onwards is a sophisticated and licentious one in which sexual liaisons, both hetero- and homosexual, are part of the social fabric, and courtesans mingle with artists, politicians and outwardly respectable couples. This undoubtedly provided a frisson for readers in an age when the normative model for women remained virginity till marriage and fidelity thereafter, and it also set the scene for Colette’s radical treatment of love and sex.

The Claudine novels, like those of Lesueur and Tinayre, deploy the script of romance but do so critically, questioning the relationship between romantic love and female self-fulfilment. The differences are telling, however. Other Belle Époque women writers queried the possibility of authentic love in a society based on sexual inequality, but maintained the ideal of heterosexual union as the ultimate form of happiness. Colette questions the validity of that ideal. Despite her robust self-reliance, Claudine, a girl of her times, shares the dream of a strong, protective male lover, the Prince Charming who will be not only the provider of emotional and sexual fulfilment but also what Beauvoir would later call the ‘sujet essentiel’ (1949, 489), he who justifies and guarantees her existence. The potency of the myth is there in Claudine’s
desire for ‘un papa, un ami, un amant’ united in one figure, and in her acknowledgement of a longing to experience submission to another will: ‘Obéir, obéir, humiliation que je n’ai jamais subie – j’allais écrire savourée’ (Claudine à Paris, I, 343; ‘To obey, to obey, a humiliation I have never suffered – I almost wrote savoured’). Renaud will reveal himself to be more trivial and less assured in his moral judgements than Claudine herself, however, and at the end of Claudine en ménage, as finally in La Retraite sentimentale, it is through a return to her own resources that she must find fulfilment. Beginning the cycle as a sociable but fundamentally solitary and self-reliant heroine, happiest in her beloved woods at Montigny, Claudine returns to this state towards the end of Claudine en ménage, encourages the escape of Annie from oppressive marriage to solitary vagabondage⁶ in Claudine s’en va, and retreats again into solitary independence when Colette, her own marriage over, finally killed off the increasingly flimsy character of Renaud in La Retraite sentimentale.⁷ The romance script loses out repeatedly in the struggle with an alternative narrative of female autonomy.

Even at those moments in the cycle when the classic script of romance is followed, it is lightly undermined by humour. Thus the ending of Claudine à Paris, the only one of the novel cycle to observe the structure of the love story – solitary heroine meets her man, falls in love, overcomes obstacles and ends the story in his arms – seems set for predictable closure with the couple, now engaged to be married, locked in an embrace:

Et nous retournons dans ma chambre, moi toute serrée dans ses bras, lui qui m’emporte comme s’il me volait, tous deux aîlés et bêtes comme des amoureux de romance. (Claudine à Paris, I, 376)

(And we went back into my bedroom, me held tightly in his arms as if he were stealing me away, both of us walking on air and silly with happiness like lovers in a romance)

⁶ Annie is a precursor of Renée Néré, the heroine of Colette’s 1910 novel La Vagabonde – a title that Colette proposed for this novel, but which was ruled out by the commercial need to keep the Claudine brand going.

⁷ Colette confirmed the pleasure she took in getting rid of Renaud in L’Étoile Vesper (1947): ‘Ce séducteur mûr, sorti de l’imagination d’une jeune femme assez jeune fille pour croire aux séducteurs mûrs, je ne l’eus pas plutôt créé que je le pris en grippe, et dès qu’il me prêta le flanc je le tuaï’ (IV, 840; ‘This ripe seducer, born of the imagination of a young woman still girlish enough to believe in ripe seducers, I had no sooner created him than I took a dislike to him, and as soon as he gave me the chance I killed him off’ [Colette, 1987, 96]).
But the door then suddenly reopens to admit Mélie, Claudine’s rustically epicurean maid (and former wet nurse), carrying before her that singularly unromantic object, the cat’s litter tray. ‘Non! La figure de Renaud!’ (‘No! The look on Renaud’s face!’), exclaims Claudine. And delighted as she is by her charge’s happiness, Mélie is no believer in the one true love, but referring to Renaud’s gay son Marcel, whom she has previously assumed to be Claudine’s suitor, reassures the bride-to-be that: ‘t’as bien raison de prendre le grand [...] pardi, il sera toujours bien temps, si la marchandise te plaît point, de t’appliquer le petit’ (376; ‘You’re right to take the old one [...] of course, if you don’t like the merchandise you can always go for the young one instead’).

Marcel’s homosexuality is ‘camped up’ for humorous purposes in the Claudine novels, but it does not single him out as a deviant or outsider, since many other characters, including the heroine-narrator, experience same-sex desire. Most mainstream fiction of the day assumed heterosexuality as the norm, but Colette describes the body of Renaud and that of her female lover, Rézi, with equally sensual precision, and is puzzled by Renaud’s conviction that ‘l’adultère est une question de sexe’ (Claudine en ménage, I, 468; ‘adultery is a matter of sex’). This frank and unconventional depiction of sex was facilitated by the books’ appearance under the signature of a man, and one known for his erotic publications moreover, and it creates another important difference between Colette and her contemporaries, who largely observed the proprieties of depicting sex only through coded allusion. Some of the erotic passages in the Claudine novels may well be embellishments by Willy, aimed at the reader as male voyeur, but others simply provide an unusually explicit female perspective on sex and are surely Colette’s own. Thus Claudine, for all her initial status as a virginal jeune fille, simply takes her own sexual appetites for granted and finds a lack of desire unnerving: ‘C’est curieux comme, depuis ma maladie, j’ai l’imagination et les nerfs chastes’ (Claudine à Paris, I, 236; ‘It’s odd how chaste my imagination and my nerves are since I’ve been ill’). Claudine’s attraction to Renaud has a strong sexual component, and once married she finds extreme pleasure in what she ironically calls her ‘conjugal duty’ – ‘Sa peau foncée et lisse glisse contre la mienne [...] tout

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8 This was the novel’s original ending. In the Fleuron edition (1948), Colette cut the final passage and allowed the Renaud-Claudine romance to end more conventionally, albeit with a touch of self-reflexive irony, on ‘comme des amoureux de romance’ (‘like lovers in a romance’). The Pléaide edition reinstates the original version.
ce grand corps où je fis tant de découvertes passionnantes!' (Claudine en ménage, I, 385; ‘His smooth, dark skin glides against mine [...] all of that big body where I made so many thrilling discoveries’) – but also, through an unmistakable analogy, alludes to the possible discomfort of penetrative sex: ‘Ce puissant Renaud me fait songer, par similitude, aux manies de la grande Anaïs qui voulait toujours gainer ses mains de gants trop étroits’ (Claudine en ménage, I, 385; ‘Renaud’s potency makes me think of [schoolfriend] Anaïs, who always tried to squeeze her big hands into gloves that were too small’). Decadent authors, writing for a smaller and more blasé readership, had been depicting diverse forms of sexuality since the 1880s, but in novels read by the general public it was unusual to find heterosexual relations at once relativised as one form of desire among others, and celebrated with such mimetic accuracy – particularly from a woman’s point of view.

Early twentieth-century critics were right in a sense to situate Colette as just one of a generation of women writers. The Claudine novels sold so well because they addressed a very contemporary agenda discernible too in the widely read fiction of Lesueur, Tinayre and others: where did women fit within the new landscape of modernity and the officially egalitarian ideology of the new Republic? How could romantic love be reconciled with the patriarchal institution of marriage? Colette’s stories addressed these questions with passion, humour and an appealing combination of mainstream values and subversive chutzpah. Claudine spoke to contemporary readers partly because she embodied values and aspirations taught to and shared by her generation: ‘Au fond, Claudine, tu n’es qu’une vulgaire honnête fille’ (Claudine à Paris, I, 328–29; ‘At heart, Claudine, you’re just an ordinary honest girl’) she upbraids herself, and in her sense of integrity, concern with physical fitness, analytical attentiveness to nature, society and psychology, and her ideal of a romantic union, she is indeed an ‘honnête fille’ of the Third Republic. On the other hand, though, Claudine was also the ‘New Woman’ of modernity, and beneath the novels’ irreverent tone and sometimes salacious humour runs an attention to the gaps between supposedly universal ideals and real possibilities for women. The recurring narrative movement of the Claudine cycle, despite its heroine’s passionate love for Renaud, is one of retreat from the marriage bond: Claudine’s repeated returns to rural solitude are echoed more graphically in Annie’s reversal of the romance script, in which a conventionally unequal marriage is likened to imprisonment, and the happy ending takes the form of escape to open-ended, solitary adventure: ‘Qu’a-t-il fallu? simplement
que le geôlier distrait tournât les talons, pour que l’horreur de la prison apparût, pour que brillât la lumière aux fentes de la porte’ (Claudine s’en va, I, 663; ‘What had it taken? It only took the gaoler to turn his back for a moment for the horror of the prison to become apparent, and the light to shine through the cracks in the door’).

‘Une femme parmi les autres’

Claudine’s final exit from conjugalitv in La Retraite sentimentale barely preceded Colette’s own separation and divorce from Willy.9 Thereafter, it was with some relief that she jettisoned her fictional alter ego, addressing Claudine in a 1908 article, ‘Le Miroir’, as ‘mon double orgueilleux!’ (‘My proud double!’) and declaring, ‘Je ne parlerai plus de ce qui est à vous’ (‘I will no longer speak of what belongs to you’); Claudine’s retreat into rural solitude would not be Colette’s: ‘A vous encore, non pas à moi, cette forteresse de solitude où, lentement, vous vous consommez’ (I, 1031; ‘This fortress of solitude where you are slowly wasting away – this is yours, not mine’). Alongside a new career as a music-hall mime and dancer, and a new relationship with Missy (the Marquise de Morny), she continued to publish, under the name ‘Colette Willy’. Writing remained a means to make a living as much as a passion for, financially, Colette needed – and this would remain the case throughout most of her life – to publish regularly, rather than focus her energy solely on time-consuming books. She had already published articles in the feminist daily La Fronde under the pseudonym ‘Eddy’ (1899–90), and signed some pieces ‘Claudine’ for the review Gil Blas. From 1907, she began to sell articles regularly to La Vie Parisienne, a fashionable, somewhat risqué publication that nonetheless prided itself on coverage of the arts.10 Many of these pieces were then collected to be published in a volume in 1908 as Les Vrilles de la vigne, inaugurating a pattern that predominated throughout Colette’s career of combining journalism with literary publication, the topical and potentially ephemeral with texts that were both poetic and profound, material necessity with artistic inspiration.

9 The printing of La Retraite was completed on 10 February 1907 – on the 13th the separation between Willy and Colette became official (I, 1537).
10 In this, La Vie parisienne resembled the American magazine Playboy in its 1950s to ’70s heyday.
Journalism would form a significant strand of Colette’s writing throughout her career. Even as she moved upwards in the literary hierarchy, thanks to recognition by some of the period’s most respected cultural gatekeepers – Proust, Gide and the *Nouvelle Revue Française* in the 1920s, the progressive if middlebrow *Nouvelles Littéraires*\(^{11}\) which championed her throughout the same decade, and by the 1940s the Académie Goncourt, of which she became President in 1949 – she continued to publish regularly in the mass-market press. Drawing on her own everyday experience and often addressing her readers directly, she constructed a public self closely based on her own, real-life persona, and invented a new form of journalistic writing described by the critic André Billy in 1923 as ‘un journalisme lyrique […], fondé sur les rencontres quotidiennes d’une vie de femme, de mère, de voyageuse, d’artiste, avec les événements de l’histoire’ (Colette, 1986, II, 1430; ‘a lyrical form of journalism […] grounded in everyday encounters in the life of a woman, a mother, a traveller, an artist and the events of history’). Her articles and regular columns appeared in publications that ranged across the political and the serious/popular spectrum, from high-quality papers like *Le Matin* (where she was also literary editor from 1918 to 1924) or *Le Figaro*, to popular dailies (*Paris-Soir*, where her column was entitled ‘une femme parmi les femmes’, *Le Petit Parisien*) and women’s magazines (*Vogue*, *Marie-Claire*, and after the Second World War the new, proudly modern *Elle*). Her journalism addressed the everyday, the contingent and the topical alongside the weightily existential – life backstage in the vibrant entertainment industries of the Belle Époque, bereavement and disablement in the First World War, surviving shortages and national humiliation in the Second World War, fashion, love, memory and ageing as constant themes – with equal attention to the mimetic precision of a word, the verbal capture of fleeting sensation and impression, and the upsetting of normative ‘truths’ through unexpected angles (one of her exemplary figures of patriotic resistance under the Occupation is a stoical prostitute) or figures of speech such as paradox and oxymoron.

\(^{11}\) The *Nouvelles Littéraires* was the best-selling literary periodical of the 1920s. In its pages Willy and Colette conducted a public argument over their respective roles in the authorship of the Claudine novels, Colette presenting her case in an interview on 27 March 1926, and Willy replying the following week. It was also the *Nouvelles* that first began to make Colette’s childhood and rural origins central to her characterisation as an author, for example with the article ‘Au Pays de Colette’ by Henry Dalby on 1 September 1928.
Situated firmly, often literally, ‘in the crowd’, Colette’s journalism shaped her public image as an accessible writer, and one whose perspective was explicitly gendered female. She welcomed and took seriously popular everyday pastimes and pleasures, from music hall and cinema to fashion, sewing and cooking. Her public persona changed with the age and with her own ageing: she was the New Woman, attuned to mainstream republican values but implicitly refusing their assumption of male supremacy; she was a mature woman, a fond mother (more so on paper than in her personal life), nostalgic for a rural childhood but very much part of the urban; she was the nation’s ‘grande Colette’, something of a national treasure, though still with a wicked gleam in her eye, a sharp tongue and pen, and the capacity to suddenly illuminate an object, a moment, an issue through unexpected observations and analogies that punctured the complacency of the period’s ‘common sense’.

The journalism, though, much of it published in the popular press and women’s magazines, was more an impediment than a help to being taken seriously as a writer. What counted in terms of literary reputation, and what over time reached the widest readership, are the books. In terms of ‘brows’, Colette certainly moved up the perceived hierarchy of letters from the 1920s, when recognition from some of the great literary names of the day led to working with more ‘serious’ publishers such as Flammarion and Grasset, the latter consecrating her as a literary author in 1928 by bringing out a first ‘collected works’. Jean Larnac published the first book-length study of Colette’s work in 1927 (Colette, sa vie, son œuvre). Histories of French literature still presented her as just part of the collective phenomenon of Belle Époque ‘littérature féminine’ (the most-cited names were Tinayre, Anna de Noailles, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, Gérard d’Houville – Lesueur had already disappeared from literary history), but they tended to distinguish her from the others particularly in terms of the quality of her style: she was beginning to be seen as a ‘trésor de la langue française’ (André, 2000, 212). An awkward mismatch nonetheless persisted between the hegemonic image of the great writer, and Colette the former music-hall dancer, popular journalist … and woman. Novelist and critic Nicole Ward-Jouve, who

12. Dans la foule (In the Crowd) is the title of a volume that brings together many of Colette’s pieces for Le Matin published between 1911 and 1914. Colette reported from among the crowd on (for example) the police shoot-out with the violent ‘Bonnot gang’, elections, the visit to Paris of King George V, major criminal trials, the final race of the tour de France, new fashions and the circus.
came of age in the France of the 1950s, recalls first encountering Colette through the general perception of her as the author of ‘fanciful and shallow’ books. For an academically inclined girl, ‘taught to admire superior male topics’, the ‘immoral’, ‘frivolous and feminine’ writer of titles that sounded like ‘diminutives, endearments, baby talk’ (Mitsou, Chéri, Gigi) was surely of little interest; ‘Real literature was about mind and anguish and nothingness and night, white or black. It spoke of the absurd and of role-playing, class-warfare, neo-colonial guilt and existence and essence’ (Ward Jouve, 1987, 1–3). Ergo, Colette was not part of ‘real literature’.

Her ‘frivolous and feminine’ books nevertheless remained very much a part of the literature which people chose to read. There is no scope here to cover the range of Colette’s considerable output, and in any case detailed critical work has already been done on the fine gradations between her life writing and fiction, on her generic innovations and on the texts themselves.\(^\text{13}\) This discussion of Colette’s post-Claudine literature will focus on a limited number of texts to illustrate three of the features that make her work at once profound and popular, formally innovative and immensely readable.

(i) A situated writing

Colette was not in any obvious sense a committed writer – indeed she enjoyed countering interviewers who tried to elicit her opinion on ‘serious’ matters with tongue-in-cheek demurrals: ‘J’écris, Monsieur – faut-il aussi que je pense?’ (Goudeket, 1965, 157; ‘I write, Monsieur – do I have to think as well?’). Yet many of her narratives are very specifically located in history and cast a critically illuminating lens on their times. The pre-1914 novels that followed the Claudine cycle depict a rapidly changing social world from a woman’s point of view: Renée Néré, heroine of La Vagabonde and its sequel L’Entrave (1913), confronts the practical as well as emotional difficulties of living as a single woman after divorce, in a society where female careers were extremely limited – ‘Que veux-tu que je fasse?’ (‘What would you like me to do?’), Renée asks of the lover who considers her work as a dancer demeaning, ‘De la couture, de la dactylographie, ou le trottoir?’ (1, 1172; ‘Seamstress, shorthand typist, or streetwalker?’) – landlords were wary of renting

\(^\text{13}\) See for example Flieger (1992); Freadman (2012).
to unattached women, and divorce meant a sudden descent of the social ladder for a woman. These are also novels that depict, warmly but without sentimentality, strata of society rarely granted literary representation, particularly that of workers in the sizeable entertainment industries of the Belle Époque. Though Colette often returned to the period of her own youth in later fiction (for example in Chéri, written in 1920 but set in 1912–13, or Gigi, written in 1944 and set in 1898–1900), offering the reader fiction’s magic carpet ride to a vividly depicted Belle Époque Paris, she still often dealt obliquely with issues contemporary at the time of writing. Thus the plot of Gribiche, published in 1936 as the Front Populaire came to power, hinges on a botched illegal abortion and the solidarity of underpaid music-hall workers. Pro-natalist laws that criminalised contraception and abortion were still active in France, and the election of a left-wing government produced the short-lived hope of a real attack on social (including gender) inequalities. The success of Gigi had much to do with the escape it offered from the traumatic period of the Occupation, but its drily affectionate treatment of a milieu in which prostitution is a respectable business with its own complex etiquette offered a nice riposte to Vichyite moralism, while the plot, at once romantic and hinging on Gigi’s stubborn insistence on determining her own future, chimed with the renewed post-war emphasis on the couple, but also on female equality.14

The First World War, though, is perhaps the historical event of which Colette wrote most clearly for a contemporary public, in both journalism and fiction. Mitsou, ou comment l’esprit vient aux filles was first serialised in 1917 in La Vie parisienne then published as a book, revised and lengthened, in 1919. Colette uses a variety of narrative techniques – theatrical dialogue and stage directions, as in a play script, omniscient narration, letters – to tell a love story between a young music-hall dancer and a handsome young officer on leave from the front. Mitsou earns little from her dancing and is also, in a spirit of quiet pragmatism, the kept mistress of an industrialist, the acronymic title of whose companies forms the name she goes by (Minoteries Italo-Tarbaïses and Scieries Orléanaises Unifiées; II, 669). Both the omniscient narrator’s commentary and Mitsou’s own voice establish her as a young woman whose instinctive grace and intelligence override her lack of means or education: she is soberly attentive to her responsibilities as an employee

14 French women finally gained the right to vote, and theoretical equality as citizens, in the new post-war Constitution.
both of the music hall and of her semi-paternal lover, ‘L’Homme Bien’, as she discreetly refers to him, and her gradual discovery of love and desire with her ‘Lieutenant Bleu’, as she names Robert, intensifies Mitsou’s perceptiveness as well as her droll and moving eloquence.

The lovers first meet when Mitsou’s more worldly wise fellow dancer, Petite Chose – ‘Je ne suis pas une personne pour le tricot! [ni] pour les pansements [ni] le colis aux prisonniers. Je suis une personne pour la chose du machin, et qui ne se retournerait pas pour voir tomber le tonnerre quand elle a un beau gosse devant elle!’ [672; ‘I’m not one for knitting! [nor] for bandages or parcels for prisoners-of-war. I’m more one for you-know-what, and a bolt of lightning won’t distract me when there’s a handsome chap around!’) – decides to hide two young officers on an illicit visit backstage, one uniformed in blue and one in khaki, not in her own dressing room but in that of Mitsou, whose reputation as a serious girl will make their discovery less likely. The relationship begins properly with letters, like so many romances in the years when most young men were conscripted into the army. Mitsou’s limited education tells in her grammatical errors and spelling mistakes, but her sincerity and wit shine through and a growing mutual tenderness develops, apparent in, for example, Robert’s detailed recall of the colours of Mitsou’s body – ‘[le] rouge pétunia de vos joues [...] vos bras et le sillon de votre dos paraissaient verts, verts comme les lilas blancs qu’on oblige à fleurir en hiver’ [683; ‘the petunia red of your cheeks […], your arms and the curve of your back looked green, the green of white lilacs forced to flower in winter’) – and Mitsou’s careful choice of gifts to send to the front, including a length of pink velvet the exact shade of the stockings she was wearing when they met, and her frankness about the future:

Il n’y a que trois grand événements de possible dans notre vie à nous autres: la mort, la célébrité théâtrale et l’amour. Mon cher Lieutenant Bleu, quel est celui des trois qui va me tombé [sic] sur la tête ou sur le cœur? J’attends. (II, 682)

(There are only three big events that can happen in lives like ours [i.e. music-hall performers]: death, fame and love. My dear Blue Lieutenant, which of these three is going to land on my head or in my heart? I’m waiting to see)

When they meet again at Robert’s next leave, their differences of class and education complicate the restaurant dinner and the night together in Mitsou’s apartment, and the horror of the trenches comes between Robert and any simple pleasure he might take in the occasion. But
focalisation of the encounter from each of their perspectives confirms its importance for both. For Mitsou it is the revelation of love, inseparable from the delight of a young male body that answers her own: ‘vous ne vous occupiez que de me prendre toute à la fois et tout uniment’ (II, 715; ‘you were only concerned to take me, all of me all at once’), she writes gratefully when Robert has returned to the front; for Robert, a sense that Mitsou is a presage of the woman he will love when age and the end of the war allow him to: ‘elle aura la douceur, et une certaine fierté, la tienne, à endurer discrètement le chagrin. J’aimerais qu’elle eût, par surcroît, un assez grand cœur sous de pareils petits seins’ (710; ‘She will have your gentleness, and a certain pride – your pride – in enduring sorrow quietly. Moreover I would like her to have a big heart beneath little breasts like yours’). The final letters leave open the possibility of a continuing love story: the barriers of social difference may not resist the force of their tenderness for each other, though the poignancy is heightened by the very strong chance that Robert will not survive the war. Proust wrote to Colette to tell her that after reading Mitsou, ‘I wept tonight, for the first time in a very long time’ (II, 1513).

The designation of the hero as ‘le Lieutenant Bleu’ has several functions: along with the other appellations by role (‘L’Homme bien’, Mitsou’s dresser is ‘La Vieille Dame’), it lends the story a fabular tone, as does the subtitle borrowed from La Fontaine;15 it contributes to the characterisation of Mitsou, for her address to Robert as ‘mon Lieutenant Bleu’ neatly combines discreet distance with warmth; above all, it makes him not just an individual, but a representative of his generation of young men conscripted after 1915 when the sky-blue uniform was adopted by the French infantry. He is one of that class of soldiers whom the war ‘a pris à la porte du collège dont nous sortions’ (‘took at the school gate we were leaving through’), those who missed out on their youth and the years when they might have learned to ‘approcher, sans épouvante comme sans cannibalisme, des femmes qui ne songent pas tout le temps à notre désir ou à notre argent’ (II, 683; ‘approach, without fear and without cannibalism, women who are not thinking only of our desire or our money’). The narrative, like Mitsou herself, treats sympathetically his difficulty in negotiating what his class would assume to be a casual, throwaway relationship with a working-class girl, when

15 La Fontaine’s fable was a more conventionally salacious account of how girls acquire ‘esprit’ (wit, intelligence) through losing their virginity. Colette’s allusion to this reinforces her story’s refusal of its politics.
it turns out to be something much more profound. Interior monologues render Robert’s youth, his exhaustion, his conflicting mix of simple pleasure in Mitsou’s company and his sense of duty to behave as a lover: on the night at Mitsou’s flat, he is torn between the desire to sink into the clean sheets and Mitsou’s companionable body and simply sleep, and his sense of masculine duty to set about ‘l’amour nécessaire, […] l’étroite inéluctable … “Allons!” […] La bouche d’abord, oui, la bouche. La gorge ensuite, n’oublions pas la gorge …’ (II, 704; ‘necessary lovemaking, […] the inevitable embrace … “Here we go!” […] The mouth first, yes, the mouth. Then the breasts, let’s not forget them …’). His physical beauty is lyrically focalised through Mitsou’s dazzled eyes – for l’Homme Bien has left her appreciative of any man without a middle-aged paunch – and both of these devices contribute to the novel’s lament for all those millions of young men lost in the mud of the trenches:

Dans la chambre de Mitsou, sur le mur tendu de dentelle au chevet du lit, il y a pour la première fois une image magnifique: l’ombre d’un torse de cavalier nu, mince à la ceinture, large aux épaules, courbé sur sa cavale invisible. (II, 704–05)

(In Mitsou’s room, etched on the lace-covered wall at the head of the bed, for the first time there is a magnificent image: the shadow of a naked rider, slim waisted and broad shouldered, leaning over his invisible steed)

Much male-authored middlebrow fiction of the period took up the cause of this same generation of men: those who returned to the home front to find a world that seemed taken over by women, in which they felt marginalised and ill at ease. In the best-selling *La Guerre, Madame …* (1916) by Paul Géraldy, or Henri Barbusse’s Goncourt-crowned *Le Feu* (1916), for example, returning soldiers find themselves unable to cope with the gulf between their experience and that of the apparently emancipated women whose lives seem simply to exclude them. Colette also depicts the impossibility of functioning normally in a civilian setting when accumulated fatigue and ‘souvenirs du sang noir en flaques, de feu en jets’ (II, 701; ‘memories of pools of blackened blood, of spurting flames’) deaden present perception, and the future is desperately fragile. But the war does not profit Mitsou or her friends, and even Petite-Chose, whose war effort takes the form of providing as many handsome soldiers as possible – ‘beaux gosses […] en plus, qui s’en [vont] peut-être mourir demain!’ (‘lovely looking boys […] who may also die tomorrow’) – with

'la chose du machin' (II, 672; ‘you know what’) is a comically likeable character. Mitsou struggles to imagine her Blue Lieutenant’s reality and to offer him her own.

With _La Fin de Chéri_, published first in 1925–26 in the literary magazine _La Revue de Paris_, then by Flammarion in 1926, Colette again addressed the topical theme of the soldier’s return. In _Chéri_ (1920), set in 1912–13, the eponymous hero is the devastatingly handsome yet vulnerable gigolo-lover of Léa, an ageing courtesan whose well-managed career has provided her with both affluence and authority. Chéri’s materially advantageous marriage to the teenage Edmée, like him the child of a high-class prostitute, leads at the novel’s end to his separation from Léa, in a scene that is intensely painful for both (and for the reader), but seems to herald the opening out of a more independent future for Chéri. The sequel opens immediately after the war. Chéri has returned from the trauma of the trenches suffering from the neurasthenia common among war veterans, to find that the pastel-toned, submissive Edmée has metamorphosed into a brisk, elegant hospital manager, depicted all in terms of harsh whites – she first appears in a ‘robe perlée de blanc’ (III, 173; ‘dress pearled in white’) then in a ‘vêtement d’intérieur, tout blanc’ (III, 176; ‘a house dress all in white’) – and the colour persists throughout. Though legally the husband is head of the family, Edmée renders Chéri superfluous with her effective management of household, finances and the post-war world in general, seconded by his mother, Charlotte, so that between them they represent the masculine fear of a world taken over in their absence by self-important, insensitive women. The men who have adjusted to the new scene are no more inspiring: Chéri’s one companion is Desmond, proprietor of a new jazz bar and a ‘trafiquant en tangos’ (III, 191; ‘trafficker in tangos’). Chéri retreats into memories of Léa, the remembered warm blue of her eyes and the soft-pink light that pervaded her house contrasting in his dreams with the harsh colours of the new reality. But when he goes to see Léa he finds not the sensual womb-like warmth of her house and presence, but a fat, short-haired old woman apparently resigned to a sexless old age of gossip, good food and friendship. Blue and pink light plays through the windows of her modern, rationally designed apartment, as Léa recommends healthy eating and attention to regular bowel movements as remedies for his pain. The reader suffers with Chéri, through whose eyes and desperate sense of loss the whole scene, indeed most of

17 In Britain, Rebecca West had published _The Return of the Soldier_ in 1918.
the novel, is focalised. As he sits ‘négligemment, les jambes croisées’
(‘casually, legs crossed’), listening to Léa’s attempts at common-sensical
advice, ‘en lui-même il contemplait son double éperdu, agenouillé, les
bras agités et la poitrine offerte, et criant des cris incohérents’ (III, 221;
inwardly he watched his distraught double, on his knees, arms waving
and chest offered, screaming wordless cries of pain’).

But Colette is not simply joining in the anti-feminist backlash that
followed women’s (very) limited gains in the First World War. Léa is not
the heartless female pragmatist, insensitive to male grief, that she seems
at first to a Chéri still emotionally marooned in the past. Léa’s own pain,
concealed beneath her dignified bonhomie, becomes apparent even to
Chéri himself: ‘Il soupçonna que Léa jouait la jovialité, l’épicuréisme
de même qu’un gros acteur, au théâtre, joue les “rondeurs” parce qu’il
prend du ventre’ (III, 223; ‘He suspected that Léa was putting on an
act of joviality and epicureanism, as a portly actor in the theatre might
accept “plump” roles because he is developing a paunch’), and if she
does not provide the refuge he needs it is because she cannot, time
being irreversible for both. Nor is Edmée simply a selfish profiteer of
war. Most readers will remember the callousness of Chéri’s treatment
of a very young, vulnerable Edmée in the first novel, and this throws a
more positive light on her new self-assertion. The energy and confidence
with which she adapts to a changed reality are deadly to the damaged
Chéri, but also reveal that ‘prodigieuse et femelle aptitude au bonheur’
(III, 259; ‘prodigious female aptitude for happiness’) that links her to
Léa, and which Colette celebrates – even if, as here, she recognises
its cost – throughout her work. Edmée’s new vitality simply cannot
accommodate a Chéri so alienated from the present. He takes refuge
in the shrine to Léa’s past beauty created by her once companion, La
Copine, whose paste jewellery and wearing of Léa’s cast-offs makes
her a sort of impoverished pastiche of Léa herself. The narrative leads
inexorably to his quiet suicide surrounded by images of the Léa he has
lost – these too now drained of affect by repeated viewings – for death
is the only possible outcome of his loss of all appetite for life. Five years
later, in *Le Feu follet* Drieu la Rochelle would end his war veteran’s
story with the same fate, but in Colette’s case it is not the treachery
of women or the sterility of a feminised world that makes her hero’s
death inevitable. *La Fin de Chéri* speaks to its era as the story of a man
for whom time has been interrupted by the inassimilable horror of the
trenches, and for whom the demands of male adulthood – self-reliance,
authority, what Desmond calls ‘managing people and things’ – have
become impossible. His sexual impotence – the female body arouses in him only a ‘répugnance précise’ (III, 201) – figures a total loss of desire for anything in the present or future. The novel provides a deft sketch of the era, with its frenetic nightlife, financial speculation, ostentatious but ineffective displays of concern for the returning soldiers and the weight of traumatised memory. Beneath this it also addresses a more fundamental human tension between the ruthless will to adapt and survive, a life instinct identified here as feminine, and an unanswerable yearning for the *jouissance* of pre-individuation, for nothingness and oblivion. The novel corresponds to my positive definition of ‘middlebrow’ in its immersivity achieved through a powerful sense of place, time and narrative momentum; in its vivid depiction and emotional mapping of its era; and in the sensory immediacy of the writing, which makes reading Colette an experience that is always more than cerebral.

(ii) Writing through the senses

Edmée’s cool competence is felt in the ‘givre de sa robe’ (III, 173; ‘white frost of her dress’), the painful clash between Chéri’s nostalgic yearning and unstoppable time materialises as Léa’s familiar laugh ‘au son grave et rond’ (‘deep and rich’) emerges from a body now weighed down by ‘[d]’énormes seins et de la fesse écrasante’ (III, 220; ‘enormous breasts and a massive bottom’). The physical beauty of the Blue Lieutenant and Chéri, sensuously detailed, is central to their characterisation: Colette was perhaps the first woman writer to pay close attention to the physicality of the male as well as female body, as object of desire as well as signifier of psychology and emotion. In Colette’s world, meaning is carried above all through the senses, and this too contributed to critics’ difficulty with defining her as a serious writer. André Rousseaux, for example, a critic in many ways sympathetic to Colette’s literary project, found her emphasis on the physical to be at odds with any proper concern for psychological and moral analysis, commenting that ‘Il y a, chez Colette, une âme assez démunie dans une nature très riche’, for her work displayed ‘cette espèce de conscience physique qui convient mieux à sa nature qu’une conscience psychologique ou morale’ (Rousseaux, 1937; quoted in Colette, III, 1828–29; ‘In Colette’s writing there is a rather

18 Feminist critics have drawn attention to this aspect of Colette’s writing – see for example Biolley-Godino (1972); Resch (1973).
impoverished soul within a very rich nature [...] a consciousness that is more physical than psychological or moral’). Sensation was intuitive, material and feminine: ‘real’ literature was analytical, moral, masculine.

But there is no absence of psychology in Colette, nor indeed of an unconventional but consistent morality. It is rather that in her work, as in life, experience is always embodied. Her characters are rarely creatures of the word – they are not intellectuals, few of them are highly educated and few (Léa is one of the exceptions, at least in the first novel) articulate ideas or feelings with any special eloquence. They express or betray thought and emotion through bodily signs and behaviour. Thus 15-year-old Gigi receives with docility her training in the complex etiquette of the high-class prostitute, the profession for which she is destined, and scarcely articulates any resistance to her aunts’ well-meant lessons in euphemism and mendacity – ‘D’appeler les choses et les personnes par leur nom, ça n’a jamais avancé à rien’ (IV, 448; ‘Calling a spade a spade never got anyone anywhere’) – but her body language tells another, unmistakable story: ‘Mais, elle essayait machinalement de libérer son beau cou musclé, pris dans un col baleiné’ (IV, 462; ‘But she tried repeatedly to free her fine strong neck from its whalebone collar’).

When the rich and fashionable Gaston, accepted by the aunts as Gigi’s lover and protector, reacts to his rejection by Gigi by becoming sick – ‘le teint bilieux et le blanc de l’œil trouble’ (IV, 475; ‘a bilious complexion and the whites of his eyes dull’) – there is no need for the narrator to spell out that he is in love, any more than Gigi’s own high temperature and ‘cerne lilas des paupières’ (IV, 474; ‘mauve shadowed eyelids’), when she believes she has lost him, require interpretation. Gaston’s revised offer of marriage produces the story’s happy ending. If Gribiche manages to be at once a vivid portrait of behind-the-scenes music-hall life in the 1900s and a telling critique of the laws that criminalised abortion, this is less thanks to explicit dialogue or narrative commentary than to the story’s graphic materiality. Unknown to the text’s naive narrator – a ‘Colette’ near the start of her music-hall career, slow to grasp the realities of her colleagues’ lives – and hence to the reader, Gribiche, a dancer in the chorus, has fallen pregnant and undergone an amateur abortion. The trail of ‘petites étoiles de sang frais’ (III, 1153; ‘little stars of fresh blood’) when Gribiche falls down the stairs is one of the few clues, correctly interpreted at once (we surmise) by her fellow dancers. Despite the other performers’ own poverty, a collection is made and the money taken by three of them, Carmen, Lise and Colette, to the home Gribiche shares with her mother, a ‘grande et grosse femme...
[aux] yeux saillants’ (‘tall, broad woman with prominent eyes’, 1164). The mother, it becomes wordlessly apparent, is the abortionist: when Gribiche faints, her mother plunges her hands beneath her to feel the sheets and withdraws them quickly to hide them in her apron. But as the visitors leave, she goes to usher them out and inadvertently reveals her hands: ‘À leur vue, Carmen fit un écart comme un cheval effrayé, tandis que, pour éviter leur contact, je bousculais Lise’ (III, 1170; ‘Seeing them, Carmen gave a start like a frightened horse and as I tried to avoid touching them I bumped against Lise’). No conclusions are explicitly drawn but the bloody hands (though blood is never named), by association with the abortion itself, suggest that Carmen’s later murmur of ‘vieille assassine’ (III, 1172) is justified. After the news of Gribiche’s death, Colette finds Carmen in her dressing room, head back, catching her tears in a blotting-paper tube to avoid spoiling her stage make-up. The tears express relief; her delayed period has begun: ‘J’avais peur ... de faire comme Gribiche, là-bas’ (III, 1174; ‘I was terrified that I was in the same mess as Gribiche’). Thus Gribiche’s dilemma is generalised, and the music-hall ethic of off-stage emotional discretion (the show must go on) embodied in Carmen’s careful weeping.

Colette’s fictional worlds are compelling because they are so fully realised in sensory terms. Characterisation and plot depend more on colour, smell, texture, sound, tone of voice and on gesture, movement, action than they do on narrative commentary or on dialogue. Throughout her work the material universe is powerfully evoked, at one level to signify human emotion, like the house Chéri inhabits with Edmée, elegant, luxurious, ‘vide et illuminée’ (III, 173; ‘empty and all lit up’) as he lingers outside in the night, or the dawn that breaks as La Naissance du jour concludes, confirming the cyclical model of time that the book affirms:

L’aube vient, le vent tombe. De la pluie d’hier, dans l’ombre, un nouveau parfum est né, ou c’est moi qui vais encore une fois découvrir le monde et qui y applique des sens nouveaux? ... Ce n’est pas trop que de naître et de créer chaque jour. (III, 370)

(Dawn comes, the wind falls. From yesterday’s rain, in the shade, a new perfume is born; or is it I who am once again going to discover the world and apply new senses to it? It’s not too much to be born and to create each day [Colette, 1979, 141])

But the precise, sensuous descriptions of nature and of place are also gratuitous, there to celebrate the thereness of things, and to register the endless interest of being in the world.
(iii) A female life course

The Blue Lieutenant and Chéri are among the few male characters whose point of view is central to Colette’s narratives; others, from Renaud to Herbert d’Espivant in Julie de Carneilhan (1941 and Colette’s last full-length novel), play important roles but are largely focalised from the perspective of female protagonists. Part of the reason for Colette’s reception as not quite ‘real literature’ is surely that she mapped the human life course in the feminine, whereas the majority of French literature considered ‘great’ (with honourable exceptions)₂⁹ assumes the human subject to be male. Colette’s default human being is a woman. Whether through fictional characters or a je close to the author’s biographical self, Colette explored each stage of the (female) life course across her œuvre. Childhood frequently appeared in the form of fictionalised memories of her happy early life in Saint-Sauveur-en-Puisaye, or sketches of her daughter Bel-Gazou, highlighting among other aspects the tension between the child’s desire for the warm, nurturing, maternal space of home and the desire for freedom and adventure. Adolescence was charted in the first Claudine, famously in Le Blé en herbe (1923) and later in novellas such as Le Tendron (1943) and Gigi (1945). Many of Colette’s fictional heroines from Claudine on are young women at stages of their lives defined by love, the need to earn a living, friendship, maternity – and soon, too, ageing. La Naissance du jour is one of the rare literary texts to deal directly with the period of the menopause and its reordering of life’s rhythms and priorities. And Colette wrote extensively, in some of her most innovative and compelling texts, about ageing – about being an old woman.

Colette created a number of fictional characters who entered the collective imagination as incarnations of a type or a historical moment: Claudine, Chéri and Gigi are perhaps the most obvious examples of this. But through her regular press publications and the books (later, also, the radio) she also constructed the character ‘Colette’, whose life, appearance, voice and singular philosophy became part of the fabric of everyday life for many French readers of the 1920s to 40s. There was no

₁⁹ Some fully ‘canonised’ French authors have imagined the human condition from a female standpoint, perhaps most notably Racine (Andromaque, Phèdre), Stendhal (in each of his novels), Flaubert in Madame Bovary. The default human being nonetheless remains male.

₂₀ See Holmes (1999).
autobiographical pact, no promise of absolute veracity, for Colette was explicit about the creative element in life writing – ‘Imaginez-vous, à me lire, que je fais mon portrait? Patience: c’est seulement mon modèle’ (epigraph to La Naissance du jour, III, 275; ‘Do you imagine, as you read me, that I’m portraying myself? Have patience: this is merely my model’) – and affirmed her right to discretion. Nor was there any overarching ‘story of my life’: though she made frequent use of the ‘I’ form, Colette never wrote an autobiography as such, ‘ni mémoires, ni journal’ (Le Fanal bleu, IV, 966). The nearest she came to this were texts like La Maison de Claudine (1922), Sido (1929), Mes Apprentissages (1935–36), but in each of these she places the focus more on relationships with significant others than on her own trajectory as a writer or as a woman. Sido, for example, is organised in three parts, the first devoted to her mother, Sido, the second to her father, Captain Colette, and the third (‘Les Sauvages’) to Sido’s four children, including but not foregrounding Colette herself. This focus on the self as defined by relationships seems to characterise female more than male writing. Certainly one forceful and pervasive trend in the predominantly male French canon is that of what Nancy Huston (2004) calls the ‘Professeurs de Désespoir’, those writers whose work is about ‘mind and anguish and nothingness and night’ (Ward-Jouve, 1987, 3), whose vision of life accentuates solitude, absurdity, the degrading materiality of the body, who reject family ties and parenthood as a drain on creativity, and romantic love as delusion. Huston’s case studies include Schopenhauer, a major influence on the French avant-garde of the Belle Époque, Samuel Beckett, Milan Kundera – and to these one might add the Decadents and Symbolists and most of twentieth-century modernism, much of the work of André Gide (‘Familles je vous hais!’), Sartre and existentialism – to go no further than Colette’s lifetime. If the male hero of so much critically fêted literature defines the everyday life of work, domesticity, material survival in terms of absurdity and banality, and seeks secular salvation through art by separating himself from the restrictive ties of heredity, family, emotional commitment,21 Colette’s work, in complete contrast, celebrates the rich materiality of existence, the body, heredity,

21 Huston writes: ‘Pour livrer son grand combat artistique, le héros nihiliste […] doit exclure de son existence tout ce qui pourrait l’affaiblir; il crache donc sur la famille, tant en amont qu’en aval, et tourne le dos à l’amour’ (2004, 351; ‘In order to wage his great artistic battle, the nihilist hero must exclude from his life all that weakens him; so he spits on family, both preceding and future generations, and turns his back on love’).
the individual as a link in life’s chain, love, sex, friendship, food – all of this as the very stuff of writing. Since ‘non-professional’ readers read for pleasure and for a sense of life enriched, a degree of optimism tends to characterise both popular and middlebrow texts. Colette’s casting of life in the feminine undoubtedly appealed and appeals to women readers; her unshakeable belief that ‘la vie est digne d’intérêt’ (Huston, 2004, 45; ‘life is worthy of our interest’) underpins her lasting appeal for a wide readership of both sexes.

Colette’s account of the life course then is anything but linear. Scenes from her childhood are briefly evoked as early as 1908, for example in ‘Jour gris’ (*Les Vrilles de la Vigne*), where the words ‘j’appartiens à un pays que j’ai quitté’ (I, 974; ‘I belong to a country I have left’) introduce a lyrical passage on the Burgundy countryside. These are later developed in the form of a series of short texts and stories about Colette’s mother, father and siblings, her village girlhood, the cats and dogs who lived with them, many of these published separately but then brought together in collections, notably *La Maison de Claudine* and *Sido*. No framing chronology is provided, but the episodes are located as the memories of a mature narrator who is identified as Colette herself. These texts, along with *La Naissance du jour* and much of the late work from the 1940s, are what Anne Freadman nicely terms Colette’s ‘livres-souvenirs’.22 The structure of fragmented scenes and anecdotes scattered over time avoids any linear narrative leading from birth to death; rather, Colette’s account of her own life course ‘construes life as a source of memories rather than as a plot’ (Freadman, 2012, 2). This produces an unusually positive view of ageing. Growing older does not mean only decline, though as a sufferer of crippling arthritis in her seventies, Colette never denies or conceals the physical impairments of old age. Rather, as the store of memories accumulates, it also means enrichment: ‘the trope of the collection comes to counter the conventional view of ageing as loss’ (Freadman, 2012, 112).

It is in two of her last books, *L’Étoile Vesper* and *Le Fanal bleu*, that Colette most directly addresses old age. Both take the loose form of a journal in that they are positioned in the present of writing and move between accounts of that present – Colette immobilised by arthritis in her ‘divan-radeau’ by the window of her apartment overlooking the Palais-Royal gardens, in dialogue with her ‘best friend’ and third

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22 Freadman translates this as ‘souvenir-books’ or ‘memory-books’ (2012, passim).
husband, Maurice Goudeket, with Pauline her housekeeper and with visiting friends — and forays into the past of both distant and recent memory. There is no plot, no teleology or overarching shape to the text, and the abandonment of fiction, characters and narrative purpose is welcomed: ‘Je déchois de l’imposture’ (L’Étoile Vesper, IV, 859; ‘I abdicate from humbug’ [Colette, 1987, 119]). In Colette’s work, characterised as it is by sensual, passionate depictions of love, the script of romance had always battled with a different aim, that of full, attentive presence in the material world, and its translation into language. Already in La Vagabonde, Renée Néré had painfully renounced the offered future with Max in the name of the ‘soin […] impérieux […] de chercher des mots, des mots pour dire combien le soleil est jaune, et bleue la mer, et brillant le sel en frange de jais blanc’ (I, 1220; ‘the dominating anxiety […] to seek for words, words to express how yellow the sun is, how blue the sea, and how brilliant the salt like a fringe of white jet’ [Colette, 1960, 176]), and in La Naissance du jour the fictional love story between the narrator and Vial had finally lost out against the narrative of writing itself. In the texts of old age, the adventure left to the narrator is this: perception of the present, memory of the wealth of past experience and the capturing of this in writing. Through this activity, in a final, life-affirming paradox, the immobilised old woman on her ‘divan-raft’ becomes a traveller in space and time, liberated by imprisonment.

There is a strong sense of continuity in Colette’s life writing: the elderly narrator is the same dryly irreverent, down-to-earth if often rhapsodic character developed across previous texts, and many features of these final books run throughout Colette’s work, both fictional and non-fictional. Though the point of view is located now not ‘in the crowd’ but above, looking down on the city from her window, these remain texts of their time, speaking explicitly to contemporary readers as well as those of posterity. L’Étoile Vesper, in particular, deals with the recent shared experience of the Occupation. Situating herself with the majority, neither heroic resisters nor active collaborators but bent on survival — ‘Je suis humblement parmi ceux qui ne firent qu’attendre’ (IV, 778; ‘Humbly, I am one of those who did nothing but wait’) — she recalls ‘le parfait et classique cauchemar’ (IV, 774; ‘the perfect and classical nightmare’) of hiding her Jewish husband, Goudeket, then of his arrest and internment in 1941. But both before and after his narrow escape from deportation, he was hidden by numerous neighbours and friends, and the overall image of Parisians faced with the Nazi presence is one of pragmatic discretion allied with passive resistance, solidarity, refusal to accord
the occupier deference or credence: ‘Imprudents à miracle, piaillleurs, frondeurs, revendicateurs de leurs “droits” misérables, ils n’oubliaient pourtant ni la prudence, ni l’instinct de duper le vainqueur’ (IV, 782; ‘Marvellously imprudent, cheeky, irreverent, insistent on their miserable “rights”, they never forgot wisdom and the instinct for duping their conquerors’ [Colette, 1987, 30]). The portrayal of the French is flattering, designed to comfort a humiliated nation by emphasising those qualities Colette cherished most: irreverence, versatility, an irrepressible dignity. As elsewhere, human qualities are also, and markedly, depicted in the feminine: awaiting news of her husband’s fate, ‘je me serrais contre la foule de femmes qui ne firent qu’attendre […] Le besoin de survivance est si vif chez nous, les femmes, et si féminin l’appétit de victoire physique’ (IV, 779, 802; ‘I took my place in the ranks of the women who waited […] The will to survive is so alive in us women, and the lust for physical victory is so female!’ [Colette, 1987, 26, 53]). The prostitute of the Palais-Royal gardens reappears, having survived deportation to Germany as part of Vichy’s provision of free French labour to the Reich, aged but undaunted, still embroidering despite her hands ‘massacred’ by being forced to carry burning dishes when she was put to work in a German restaurant (IV, 785). In Le Fanal bleu, Colette links the two world wars by recalling in similar terms the female ‘phalanstère’ (‘phalanstery’)23 of friends with whom she lived during the absence at the front of her second husband, Henry de Jouvenel, and how on those nights when cannon fire from the east could be heard in Paris, Marguerite Moreno would improvise a flamenco to its rhythm and make them all laugh, returning to them ‘la saine impertinence et la témérité des héroïnes’ (IV, 1034; ‘the healthy impertinence and courage of heroines’).

Both texts are also threaded through with references to contemporary fashions, to well-known celebrities of the period who formed part of Colette’s close circle of friends, such as Jean Cocteau and the screen idol Jean Marais (also, unknown to most of his fans, Cocteau’s lover), to the effects of the war years on children’s health and behaviour and the thrilling rediscovery of chocolate, cakes, non-rationed milk and electricity after the deprivations of 1940–44. Colette can justifiably assume a continuing relationship with a large number of readers whose reference points and

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23 The ‘phalanstère’ was a utopian community conceived by the socialist thinker Charles Fourier (1772–1837), an important aspect of which, interestingly, was gender equality. The word connotes communal, mutually supportive living, outside the norms of the patriarchal family.
interests intersect her own, and who take pleasure in observing the next stages in a well-charted life. Readers also appear in the texts themselves, summarised or quoted, from the respectfully affectionate, like the village schoolmaster whose pedagogy is clearly inspired by Colette – ‘je leur enseigne à connaître, c’est-à-dire à aimer’ (Le Fanal bleu, IV, 994; ‘I teach them to know, in other words to love’) – to all those who send unsolicited manuscripts for her opinion or request her views on the most random of matters – ‘Je me permets de vous demander cela, madame Colette, parce qu’on sait bien que vous connaissez la vie’ (IV, 1015; ‘I take the liberty of asking you this, Madame Colette, because everyone knows that you know about life’). The humour that enlivens Colette’s writing adds to some less proper communications from an unknown public, including the anonymous phone caller who repeatedly rings in the middle of the night, checks that this really is Colette he is speaking to, then says, ‘Je vous emmerde’ (‘Screw you!’) and puts the phone down, and the man who sometimes begs her to ‘listen to a serenade’ that begins:

Poil au bec de gaz
Mon cul sur le commode,
Poil au chandelier,
Mon cul sur l’escalier … (IV, 818)

(Hair on the gas-lamp
My arse on the commode,
Hair on the chandelier,
My arse on the stairs)

‘J’accorde que les paroles sont d’un mérite discutable’, she comments drily, ‘et qu’elles attribuent d’in vraisemblables pilosités à des objets mobiliers. Mais quelle belle voix de baryton!’ (IV, 818; ‘I admit that the words are of dubious merit and that they attribute improbable hairiness to articles of furniture. But what a fine baritone!’ [Colette, 1987, 70]). Thus her public persona, by now well established as a national treasure, is both assumed and made fun of. She alludes wryly to her association with the themes of family and animals, recalling, as she begins a sentence, ‘Ma mère me contait …’, the sighs of another female literary contemporary: ‘allons, bon, eût dit Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, voilà encore sa mère, sa chatte n’est pas loin!’ (L’Étoile Vesper, 846; “Off we go again”, as Lucie Delarue-Mardrus might have said. “We’re back to her mother already, her cat can’t be far away!” [Colette, 1987, 103]).

The texts of old age remain engaged with the present, addressed more directly to ‘ordinary’ readers than to literary peers, combative in their
refusal to accept the conventional identification of ageing with decline, and enlivened by a humour that refuses to take the writer or her work too seriously. But at the same time this is very serious writing, for it is about the end of the life course and the death that follows. It proposes, or confirms, an exceptionally positive philosophy that accords value to all of experience, from the ordinary and the trivial to the great events of a life or of history. If Colette finds herself incapable of writing a memoir that would set the whole trajectory of her life within that of the age, this is because ‘Choisir, noter ce qui fut marquant, garder l’insolite, éliminer le banal, ce n’est pas mon affaire, puisque, la plupart du temps, c’est l’ordinaire qui me pique et me vivifie’ (Le Fanal bleu, 966; ‘The art of selection, of noting things of mark, retaining the unusual while discarding the commonplace, has never been mine, since most of the time I am stimulated and quickened by the ordinary’ [Colette, 1963, 6–7]). Thus the near loss of Maurice, the birth of Colette’s daughter, the proximity of death take their place among the memories of forest walks near St-Sauveur, the magical paraphernalia of a hardware shop in Geneva, the games of the children in the garden outside. Writing, which in so much twentieth-century French literature transcends all other forms of human activity as a form of self-realisation and justification of a life, is only one form of human creativity that competes, at the end of L’Étoile Vesper, with embroidery: ‘Guidées par la même main, plume et aiguille, habitude du travail et sage envie d’y mettre fin lient amitié, se séparent, se réconcilient …’ (IV, 881; ‘Guided by the same hand, pen and needle, the habit of work and the commonsense desire to bring it to an end become friends, separate, come together again …’ [Colette, 1987, 144]). The individual subject, rather than heading tragically for extinction, continues to the end to amass ‘le chaud pêle-mêle de souvenirs froissés’ (IV, 813; ‘the cosy jumble of crumpled souvenirs’) and to journey among them, even pain adding to the accumulation of diverse experiences: ‘Surtout j’ai la douleur, cette douleur toujours jeune, active, inspiratrice d’étonnement, de colère, de rythme, de défi …’ (IV, 968; ‘Chief among them is pain, pain ever young and active, instigator of astonishment, of anger, imposing its rhythm on me, provoking me to defy it’ [Colette, 1963, 9–10]). Death will not extinguish all traces of the subject for her legacy will remain in projects begun and still to come to fruition – like the orange tree planted in La Naissance du jour, whose fruit will be ready to harvest in ten years by ‘moi ou quelqu’un d’autre, ça n’a pas d’importance’ (III, 327; ‘myself or someone else, it doesn’t matter’) –, in those whose lives she has touched, just as Sido’s presence permeates
Colette’s life and writing, and in the writing itself. In any case the self, strong, singular and avid for life as she may be, is conceived as part of a greater whole: life goes on. The prospect of the end of life takes on the affirmative image of the open sea:

Au lieu d’aborder des îles, je vogue donc vers ce large où ne parvient que le bruit solitaire du cœur, pareil à celui du ressac? Rien ne dépérit, c’est moi qui m’éloigne, rassurons-nous. Le large, mais pas le désert. Découvrir qu’il n’y pas de désert: c’est assez pour que je triomphe de ce qui m’assiège. (Le Fanal bleu, IV, 96)  

(Instead, then, of landing on new islands of discovery, is my course set for the open sea where there is no sound other than that of the lonely heat-beat comparable to the pounding of the surf? Rest assured, nothing is decaying, it is I who am drifting. The open sea, but not the wilderness. The discovery that there is no wilderness! That in itself is enough to sustain me in triumphing over my afflictions [Colette, 1963, 5–6])

Against the grain of the century, Colette models the human life course in the feminine, in relationship with others, and as neither tragic nor absurd. Her fragmentary, cumulative narrative of life reached and still reaches a wide readership because it celebrates and thus enriches what Nancy Huston once summarised as ‘la vie changeante, fluctuante, pleine de secrets et d’impalpable et de contradictions et de mystères’ (2004, 34; ‘life with all its changes and fluctuations, full of secrets, of the intangible, of contradictions and mysteries’). It is an account of a human life that corresponds to Huston’s and Todorov’s definitions of literature’s real function: it ‘helps us to live’ (Todorov, 2007, 72).

Conclusion

Colette achieved the unusual distinction of being at once a wise and profound commentator on the life of her times, and on life tout court, for whom formal experimentation was the necessary consequence of having original things to say, and a writer whose work entered the everyday reading practices of the majority. Julia Kristeva writes of her ‘génie affirmatif dans ce qu’il apporte d’insolite au cœur de la tragédie humaine telle que l’a exhibée le XXe siècle’ (2004, 19; ‘affirmative genius that brings something new and out of the ordinary to the twentieth century’s vision of the human tragedy’), and it is Colette’s affirmative view of life, evident in her respect for the ordinary and the everyday, her
model of individual life as always in relation with others, her cyclical patterning of time, that have set her outside the dominant literary trends of her century and made her status ‘middlebrow’ in the pejorative sense. I place her instead in what may be termed a median position that bridges ‘high literary’ qualities – exquisite mastery of the semantic, rhythmic and aural possibilities of the French language, serene disruption of generic boundaries (notably that between fiction and autobiography), an undermining of entrenched ‘commonsense’ binaries through the use of oxymoron and paradox – and the ‘low’ qualities that generate pleasure for most readers: deeply immersive fictional worlds, humour, relevance to our own lives, wisdom and affirmation of life’s interest and value.