The Intersecting Realities and Fictions of Virginia Woolf and Colette

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A Dense Network of Friends

While it appears unlikely that Virginia Woolf and Colette ever met, they certainly communicated, albeit indirectly. Evidence suggests that they knew each other’s work.¹ This mutual knowledge was facilitated in part by the network of friends that they shared, many of whom traveled frequently between England and France. These mutual acquaintances included Singer sewing machine heiress Winnaretta (Winnie) de Polignac, the composer, suffragist, and writer Ethel Smyth, writers Vita Sackville-West, Violet Trefusis, Radclyffe Hall and her lover Una Troubridge, the poetess Comtesse Anna de Noailles, bookstore owners, publishers, and translators Sylvia Beach and her lover Adrienne Monnier, and the photographer Gisèle Freund.²

A number of the women linking Woolf and Colette were themselves part English or American and part continental European (for example, Sackville-West, Polignac, and Trefusis), their itinerant lifestyles a result of their search for a place where their unconventional ways and ideas, for many their homosexuality or bisexuality, would not raise eyebrows. Some, such as Polignac, had close relationships with both Colette and Woolf; others, such as Trefusis and Freund, had firsthand experiences with one or both writers; and still others had contact with one and indirect contact with the other. Vita Sackville-West learned about Colette from Violet Trefusis; Troubridge and Hall, not part of the Bloomsbury set, had a professional rather than a personal relationship with Woolf. In retracing these relationships and encounters, both the long-lived and the fleeting, one finds a paper trail, in French and in English, that leads from Woolf to Colette and from Colette to Woolf (like the journal of Eleanor Butler, one of the two Ladies of Llangollen, described in
Colette’s *Le pur et l’impur*). A number of these writers do write about both Woolf and Colette, in some cases at length; however, none makes explicit comparisons between the two women or their work. The purpose of this analysis is to make those connections.3

Woolf wrote often about France. On a number of occasions she describes her relationship to the French in reference to Colette, each time contrasting herself with her French contemporary. In a letter Woolf tells Jane Bussy, daughter of French artist Simon Bussy and Dorothy Strachey Bussy, Lytton Strachey’s sister, that Colette’s autobiographical work *Mes apprentissages* (which Woolf read in the original) makes her feel “dowdy.” She extends her comparison of herself with her French contemporary to the French in general.

What a good friend you are my dear Janie, to remember that book. It has come at the very nick of time when I’ve nothing to read. And it looks—for I’ve only just cut the pages—full of the most entrancing, wicked, underworld Bohemian life, and just after my taste, though I still can’t think how Colette being what she is, to look at, ever sent me her discourse with that cryptic message. She makes me feel so dowdy. The French always do. (July 29, 1936, *Letters* 6: 60)

On a second occasion, this time while in northern France in June 1939 with Leonard, in a letter to Ethel Smyth, Woolf makes another implicit connection between France and Colette, whose novel *Duo* she is reading as she travels.4

But Lord how rapturous and civilized and sensuous the French are compared with us, and how it liberates the soul to drink a bottle of good wine daily and sit in the sun, and even the white robed clergy under Palanquins dont [sic] offend, but even induce in me regrets for our stony and grim Protestantism. . . .

[and a few lines on]

And I’m reading Colette, “Duo” [1934]; all about love; and rather too slangy for my vocabulary, but what a born writer! How she walzes [sic] through the dictionary. (June 18, 1939, *Letters* 6: 341)

Again here, French sensuality highlights the “grim Protestantism” of the British; Colette’s fast-paced *patois* outsteps Woolf’s grasp of the French language. This difference, this other culture creates desire in
Woolf. On returning home from this same trip, in a letter to Elaine Robson, Woolf expresses a wish to be half French: “I wish I were French and English as you are, like an ice that is half strawberry and half lemon” (Letters 6: 339). This choice of metaphor describes the relationship the quintessentially English Woolf shared with her French contemporary, Colette, and sets the stage for a comparative analysis of their lives and works. In terms of temperament, the two writers appear to stand in diametric opposition to one another. However, like Woolf’s ice, the two flavors and colors of which bleed into each other, the line dividing the two women wavers. Woolf’s confession that, although Colette’s *Mes apprentissages* makes her feel dowdy, it is also “just after [her] taste,” coupled with her desire to be half French, suggests the complexity of the relationship that exists between the two writers. Woolf at once “envies” Colette—she asks, “Is it the great French tradition that lifts her so serenely, and yet with such a flare down, down to what she’s saying? I’m green with envy” (Woolf, Letters 6: 49)—but sees her as no threat since she is not writing in the same language.

Colette writes directly to Woolf in a cryptic language that her English contemporary cannot decipher. Colette, notorious for her reticence with regard to the work of her contemporaries (Goudeket 146), leaves no concrete evidence as to whether or not she read Woolf’s novels. Like the lines of correspondence via which I will trace the ties linking the two women, Woolf’s relationship to Colette’s work is qualified and mediated.

**Correspondence in Two Languages**

All of the figures explored in this chapter have interesting stories of their own to tell. For my purposes, however, I read their novels, memoirs, and biographies only where they relate to the two writers on whom this chapter focuses. In figure 3 I offer a graphical representation of the network mediating relations between Woolf and Colette. The lines indicate face-to-face encounters; square boxes accompany the names of English and American women, circles the names of French women, or those who lived in France for substantial amounts of time, such as Freund, and diamonds those who were of mixed heritage and divided their time between France and England.

Gisèle Freund’s photographs establish the contemporaneity of Colette and Woolf and provide a visual link between the two writers. Her portraits show Woolf and Colette face to face, as did those of
Jacques-Émile Blanche. Freund, a German Jew who simultaneously worked as a photographer and studied the history and sociology of the camera in Paris, photographed both women in 1939 as part of a larger series, which included some of the best-known European and South American writers. Freund met many writers as a student at the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris. A chance encounter with Adrienne Monnier, proprietor of the rue de l’Odéon bookstore La Maison des Amis des Livres, and through her with the American Sylvia Beach, whose Shakespeare and Company bookstore sat across the street from Monnier’s store, gave her further access to Parisian literary circles.

In 1939 Woolf is at work on her biography of painter and fellow Bloomsburg group member Roger Fry, her novel Pointz Hall, which would later become Between the Acts, and her brief memoir “Sketch of the Past”; just two years later she will commit suicide in the River Ouse. In the same year, Colette, recently inducted into the Académie royale belge de langue et de littérature françaises (1935), publishes Le toutounier, the sequel to her novel Duo. As Woolf comes to the end of her career, Colette begins to receive the recognition denied her in her early years of writing. A pivotal year historically, 1939 marks the end of a reprieve between the two wars, a moment both Woolf and Colette individually contemplated with horror and incredulity. On August 29,
1939, a month after her return from a holiday in northern France with Leonard, Woolf writes to Vita Sackville-West: “I cant [sic] help letting hope break in,—the other prospect is too mad” (Letters 6: 354). Colette writes to Hélène Picard: “I would never have believed that human kind would come to this a second time” (my translation: Lettres à Annie de Pène 201). On September 3, 1939, Britain and France declared war on Germany.

In the two photographs I have chosen (see figures 4 and 5), Woolf (age 58) and Colette (age 66) hold a strikingly similar pose. Both photographs are close-ups; both represent the subject looking slightly sideways at the camera. Colette’s fist is clenched, Woolf’s hand open as she holds a cigarette. The strength and solidity of Colette’s pose and the warm colors of the photograph (she wears a red scarf) contrast with the ambivalence suggested in Woolf’s raised eyebrows, perhaps indicating her reluctance to be photographed evidenced by her reaction to the request for the sitting, and the lighter colors (the white lace blouse front) of her photograph. Freund’s descriptions of her encounters with the two women, Colette within the context of a longer relationship and Woolf over a single couple of days, support this reading of her photographs.

Freund photographed Colette for the first time in color in the spring of 1939 at her Parisian apartment in Palais Royal. Colette, propped up in bed—her signature location as she became steadily more crippled with arthritis—was at ease with Freund: “Colette was not concerned about looking beautiful on film. What she wanted, above all, was to fascinate. With her penetrating eyes and her studied gestures, she was a born actress who loved the lens and understood its requirements” (The World 114).

Colette’s aim was to capture her audience with her reality, but, as Freund suggests, hers was the reality of “a born actress.” Her appearance is studied and staged. For Freund Colette’s colors, her flame-red hair, her favorite blue paper, and her crimson scarf, define her.

“I always work lying down,” she told me. “I have arranged a little table which slides over the bed.” The lamp attached to the working table was covered with periwinkle-blue paper, like the sheets she used for writing. Even at that early hour her face was carefully made up. Her hair, thick and crisp, flaming red, was cut short and fell in bangs over her forehead. It framed her face, brightened by her dramatic eyes, like a crown of flames. A crimson scarf, tucked into her navy-blue dressing gown, created a symphony of color that was perfect for the photograph. (The World 114)
In her description of her encounter with Woolf, Freund remarks on Woolf’s absence of color. In sharp contrast to “the symphony of colors” evoked by Colette, Woolf is luminous. While Freund portrays Colette as round, fleshy, and warm, Woolf, although beautiful and sensuous also, is angular, fleshless, and cold.

The impressions we form of writers’ faces from their books are often inaccurate. To me H. G. Wells looked more like a country doctor than a novelist. But Virginia Woolf, frail and luminous, was the very embodiment of her prose. She was fifty-eight when I met her. Her hair was turning gray. She was tall and slender, and her features, at once sensual and ascetic, were astonishingly beautiful. Her protruding eyebrows jutted out over large serious eyes in deep sockets. Her full and tender mouth was touching in its sadness. Her very straight, delicate nose seemed fleshless. Her face, as if bathed in inner light, reflected both a visionary’s sensibility and great sincerity. Indeed, that very reserved woman generated a captivating atmosphere. (The World 130–31)

Freund had approached Woolf on the suggestion of James Joyce, who
after an initial refusal in 1938 himself became the subject of a photo-essay by Freund. Freud gained access to Woolf with the help of Victoria Ocampo, editor of the Argentinian review *Sur* and a friend and correspondent of Woolf’s: “I met her during those unquiet months when the English were beginning to realize that another war was inevitable. She was shattered by the prospect” (*The World* 129). Woolf agreed to the sitting, after an initial refusal, and asked that Freund photograph Leonard and her dog also. Woolf chain-smoked during the sitting, perhaps reflecting her discomfort. She later wrote in her diary how much she had disliked the sitting, calling it “detestable & upsetting,” resulting in “a life sized life coloured animated photograph” (*Diary* 5: 220). While Freund realized Colette “loved the lens,” she understood that “[Woolf] had a horror of anything that might expose her private life” (134). Woolf never saw Freund’s photographs; she was in the countryside on Freund’s subsequent visit to England. When Freund later went to Argentina in flight from the Nazis, she learned that Woolf had reproached Ocampo for having brought Freund to her house. Freund, initially surprised at Woolf’s reaction, contends that “[Woolf] probably felt threatened by the idea that [the photographs] might be published without her having chosen the ones she preferred” (134).
Freund reads both women as she would their work. She conceived of herself in literary terms, as a translator of sorts: “A photographer is asked, not to create forms, but to reproduce them. In the hierarchy of artists he is closest to the translator, and a good translator must himself know how to write” (The World 250). Woolf, evasive, “frail and luminous,” is “the very embodiment of her prose.” Colette, “a born actress,” like many of her protagonists, is independent and unafraid, yet enigmatic and masked. When Freund photographed Colette in 1952, celebrating her eightieth birthday, it was at the Hôtel de Paris in Monte Carlo, a location that might have come, Freund suggests, “straight out of one of her novels” (115). Thus, Woolf’s transparency and vulnerability stand in contrast to Colette’s controlled confidence. However, the similarity of the pose struck by each writer, Colette’s aim to fascinate and Woolf’s ability to captivate, and the coincidence of the dates of the photographs suggest a commonality between these two contemporaries.

Freund’s characterization of herself as a translator takes us back to Beach and Monnier, Freund’s benefactors in a number of ways, and for whom Freund functioned, as Nicola Luckhurst has suggested, as an “official portraitist” of sorts—her photographs adorned the walls of both women’s bookstores (Caws and Luckhurst 6).14 Like Freund, Beach and Monnier acted as bridges, their bookstores, the one English and the other French, at the heart of what Monnier called Odéonia (the area surrounding the rue de l’Odéon on Paris’s Left Bank where the two bookstores stood), becoming the site of a dialogue among contemporary writers and artists, the importance and proportions of which are today almost inconceivable. The wealth of names we find in Beach’s memoir Shakespeare and Company and in Monnier’s The Very Rich Hours of Adrienne Monnier—Joyce, Ernest Hemingway, H. D., the writer Bryher (Winifred Ellerman, whose work the two women translated), André Gide, André Malraux, Radclyffé Hall, and Rainer Maria Rilke, to name but a very few—suggests the centrality of these two lesser-known figures to the Modernist movement.

While it appears that Beach and Woolf did not meet, they shared a set of friends and acquaintances in common, including T. S. Eliot, Joyce, the poet Edith Sitwell, and Gertrude Stein. Beach sold Woolf’s works at her Shakespeare and Company bookstore, and J. H. Willis estimates that Shakespeare and Company “stocked selected Hogarth Press books from at least 1925 on” (392). Among these were Theodora Bosanquet’s Henry James at Work, purchased at Beach’s bookstore by George Spater (coauthor of A Marriage of True Minds: An Intimate Portrait of Leonard and Virginia Woolf) in 1925 (Willis 426 n. 24).
Woolf purchased her copy of Joyce’s *Ulysses* from Beach (Fitch 105), a purchase she references twice: first in her diary of August 1922—she cannot buy clothes because she is “horribly in debt for Joyce & Proust at this moment” (*Diary* 2: 187)—and again in a letter to Roger Fry in October of the same year—she has “[bound herself to Ulysses] like a martyr to a stake,” having finished it “thank God,” she hopes to sell it for £4.10 (*Letter* 2: 566). While Beach, in her capacity as self-described “midwife” to Joyce’s *Ulysses*, would have found herself distanced from Woolf (and Bloomsbury in general), with whom Joyce had mixed relations, she certainly read Woolf’s work, discussing Woolf and other contemporary women writers in letters she exchanged with Bryher (Fitch 86). A copy of a photograph of T. S. Eliot and Virginia Woolf forms part of Sylvia Beach’s collection at Princeton University (reproduced in Bonnie Kime Scott’s *The Gender of Modernism*). Among the chapters of her 1956 memoir is one entitled “A Bookstore of My Own,” perhaps a reference to Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*.

As Thurman suggests, Beach, and I would assume Monnier also, met Colette at fellow American expatriate Natalie Barney’s salon (386). Monnier also got to know Colette via mutual friends. In *The Very Rich Hours of Adrienne Monnier*, Monnier describes her “Lunch with Colette,” the title of her piece about Colette, which first appeared in *Le figaro littéraire* in 1942. Initially apprehensive—“I cannot imagine how one can give pleasure to Colette when one is not a flower or an animal, a taste or a scent, a color or music” (197)—Monnier finds Colette warm and accessible. They eat and discuss food and rationing, haunted houses and fortune-telling—books are conspicuously absent from their conversation. Monnier reads Colette’s palm, finding there, not unexpectedly, indications of a “rich sensuality,” but one accompanied by a thumb that connotes violence in its possessor, “extraordinary,” Monnier suggests, in a woman (199). Colette confirms her penchant for violence—“I love knives, blades, not revolvers [ . . . ] a silent blade with a fine taper”—and Monnier expresses relief that this violence has been channelled into Colette’s work (199). Despite the fact that the two women moved in different circles, Colette on the Right Bank, Monnier the Left—although Colette, as Benstock reminds us, had herself once resided on the Left Bank also (*Women of the Left Bank* 204)—their paths crossed on several other occasions, Colette visiting Monnier at home (Monnier 481) and from time to time bringing books and coffee (Pichois and Brunet 430). The two women shared provincial ties and an acquaintance with contemporary French writer Rachilde (Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank* 204–5). Colette’s association with a woman of
“quality” such as Monnier, assert Pichois and Brunet, demonstrates Colette’s ability to move outside, despite herself, they suggest, her close group of friends represented in *Lettres de la vagabonde* and *Aux Toutounet* (430).

Beach and Monnier function as surrogates mediating between Woolf and Colette in particular and between the anglophone and francophone communities of Paris, and more broadly Europe and the United States (specifically in terms of Joyce’s *Ulysses*), in general. The spatial proximity that determined the relationship of Beach and Monnier, one at odds with that shared by Woolf and Colette, their role as traffickers in books, both selling and lending, and as translators, publishers, and memoirists (Monnier also wrote poetry), highlights the possibilities for ties between the two contemporaries on whom this chapter focuses.

While Freund’s photographs establish a linear, contemporaneous link between Woolf and Colette, similar in its multifacetedness to those of Woolf, Beach, Monnier, and Colette is the set of relations shared by Woolf, Vita Sackville-West, Violet Trefusis, and, more peripherally, Colette. These relationships underscore the depth of the connections linking Woolf and Colette and their social proximity. Woolf, Vita, and Violet variously had love affairs, met face to face, corresponded by letter, referenced each other in memoirs, and based characters in their novels on each other; Colette enters this set of relations in a secondary, but nonetheless important, role. Colette’s involvement in this group emphasizes the role nationality plays in this cluster of relations.

Vita was a figure central to Woolf’s life. She first met Woolf in 1922 and became Woolf’s lover and the inspiration for the novel *Orlando*. Vita functions as a channel by which Woolf gains access to a different France from the one she sees with her husband.

France played a central role in another of Vita’s extramarital affairs. Prior to her relationship with Woolf, Vita had had a love affair with Violet Trefusis (spanning the years 1918–20). Violet, an English expatriate, more at home in Paris than London, developed a close friendship with Colette in the later years of Colette’s life. Writing in French and in English about the relationship between England and France, Violet brought France to the British and England to Colette and her French contemporaries (Julian and Phillips 72–73).

The mixed nature of Vita’s and Violet’s heritage and their itinerant lifestyles contrast with the relative national homogeneity of those of Woolf and Colette (despite the possibility of Colette’s Martiniquan heritage and Woolf’s French ancestry). Vita was the granddaughter of an internationally renowned Spanish dancer, called Pepita (about whom
she wrote a book); her mother was half-Spanish, her father English. Educated in France as a child, she returned often as an adult. Violet’s Scottish paternal grandmother had been brought up in Greece; those on the other side of the family, the Keppels, were of Dutch descent (Jullian and Phillips 9–10). When Vita and Violet eloped in 1920, they ran to France. Once retrieved by their husbands, in order to avoid scandal Violet and her husband, Denys Trefusis, moved permanently to Paris, where Violet wrote and presided over a literary salon.

On the single trip to France that Woolf and Vita took alone, Vita, unwittingly perhaps, introduced Woolf to Colette’s France. In 1928 Woolf traveled with Vita to Burgundy, Colette’s pays natal. “It amuses me,” wrote Vita to her husband, Harold Nicolson, “to be suddenly in the middle of Burgundy with Virginia” (Vita to Harold 204). “[Woolf] loved travelling,” she later told Jean Russel Noble in an interview:

She was as excited as a schoolgirl on arriving in Paris. We went out after dinner and found a bookseller’s shop open, and she perched on a stool and talked to the old bookseller about Proust. Next day we went south to Burgundy. There she forgot all about Proust in the simple enjoyment of the things we found. A fair in a French village, roundabouts, shooting-galleries, lions and gipsies giving a performance together, stalls with things to buy; all was sheer fun. We bought knives and green corduroy coats with buttons representing hares, pheasants, partridges. They were said to be gamekeepers’ coats, but Virginia preferred to think that they were poachers.’ The poacher would naturally be dearer to her mind than the keeper. (Noble 135–36)

The two women went on to Avallon and Auxerre, where they visited the cathedral and curiosity shop, then to Vézelay where Virginia sat among the vines and wandered with Vita down “unfamiliar French lanes” (Noble 136). Colette’s Burgundy thus becomes an important place in terms of Woolf’s sexual history and her relationship with Vita.

Woolf met Vita’s former lover, Violet, in 1932—a meeting, Woolf suggests in a letter, occasioned by Violet’s desire to publish her novel Tandem (1933) at the Hogarth Press (Letters 5: 123). Violet recounts the meeting in her memoir and, I would argue, reimagines it for the purpose of her novel Broderie anglaise, while Woolf describes it in a letter to Vita. Common ties with Vita shape their encounter. Although Violet portrays herself as facilitator of a meeting between Woolf and her famous mother, Mrs. Keppel, the mistress of Edward VII, Woolf casts
Violet in a more central role. Violet describes her mother and Woolf as anxious to meet each other but then unable to address their admiration the one for the other, instead talking in a code of sorts.

It would have been difficult to find two people more dissimilar than Virginia Woolf and my mother. Yet, strange as it may seem, they were deeply interested in one another, and longed to meet. [...] After about half an hour’s spasmodic conversation, we were longing to see if the experiment had been a success—we unobtrusively moved nearer—they certainly seemed very animated. “Personally, I’ve always been in favour of six cylinders though I know some people think four are less trouble.” “My dear Mrs Keppel, you wouldn’t hesitate if you saw the new Lanchester with the fluid fly-wheel!” Neither knew a thing about motors; both thought they were on safe ground, discussing a topic on which they could both bluff to their heart’s content. (Don’t Look Round 107–8)

Woolf describes for Vita another somewhat awkward and cryptic encounter, this time with Violet:

Lord what fun! I quite see now why you were so enamoured—then: she’s a little too full, now, overblown rather; but what seduction! What a voice—lisping, faltering, what warmth, suppleness, and in her way—and its not mine—I’m a good deal more refined—but thats not altogether an advantage—how lovely, like a squirrel among buck hares—a red squirrel among brown nuts. We glanced and winked through the leaves; and called each other punctiliously Mrs Trefusis and Mrs Woolf—and she asked me to give her the Common R., which I did, and said smiling, By the way, are you an Honourable too? No, no, she smiled, taking my point, you, to wit. (Letters 5: 121)

The obtuse and formal nature of the communication described by Woolf, the winking and glancing through the leaves, the use of last names, and the mention of being an Honourable, a veiled reference to Vita, parallels Violet’s description of the coded nature of her mother’s exchange with Woolf. Both accounts reflect the mediated nature of the relationship Violet and Woolf shared.

This series of real links is rewritten in the pages of their novels. Both Violet and Woolf wrote fictional versions of their relationship with Vita—both responses inspired by Vita’s (and Violet’s) fictional version of their love affair, Challenge (1923). In Violet’s novel, Broderie anglaise (1935), Alexa, an unmarried quintessentially English novelist, is Woolf,
and her lover John Shorne, Vita.\textsuperscript{18} Violet herself figures in the novel as the mysterious “almost foreign” Anne Lindell, John’s former lover, now married and living in France (19). \textit{Broderie anglaise} is a tale of revenge. Vita’s character John visits and then takes leave of his lover, Woolf’s Alexa, who is secretly preparing for a visit from her rival, Violet’s Anne. After a frank talk with Anne, over éclairs, in which Anne reveals that John has lied to Alexa about how their relationship ended (it was John, dominated by his mother, who broke it off, not Anne), Alexa finds the strength to reject John: “Thanks to what Anne had told her she was going to be able to confound John and make him suffer for once. She and Anne were now colleagues, both on the same side” (95). Violet’s descriptions of “tall, narrow, contemplative” (15) Alexa are rather unflattering: “The vagueness, or, rather, the limpness, of her clothes lent her movements the undulation of a sea-anemone. She was fluid and elusive; a piece of water weed, a puff of smoke. Her face, she discovered, was one of those that was untranslatable to foreigners, arousing in them only pity or scorn” (12). As does Freund, Violet paints Alexa/Woolf in pale colors. “I’ve got a youthful eye, an elderly neck, and a finely chiseled mouth and chin. But the whole thing lacks colour. I’m a drawing, a dry-point etching, not a painting!” (11). Anne/Violet celebrates her own acquired foreignness and holds Alexa/Woolf’s Englishness against her: “What a bore it is,” sighed Alexa, “that I can’t lay claim to any misalliances! My family consists of nothing but respectable middle-class citizens, much too learned and rather sexless. Our only flirtations have been with theses, and all we’ve ever carried away is an audience” (40).

Violet’s novel can be understood as a response to Woolf’s \textit{Orlando}, where Woolf portrays Violet as Orlando’s first love, Sasha, the Russian princess.

She was like a fox, or an olive tree; like the waves of the sea when you look down upon them from a height; like an emerald; like the sun on a green hill which is clouded—like nothing he had seen or known in England. Ransack the language as he might, words failed him. He wanted another landscape, and another tongue. English was too frank, too candid, too honeyed a speech for Sasha. For in all she said, however open she seemed and voluptuous, there was something hidden; in all she did, however daring, there was something concealed [ . . . ] [S]he never shone with the steady beam of an Englishwoman. (47)

The portrayal by each one of the other as a foreigner suggests that nationality is central to this case of romantic literary rivalry. In \textit{Orlando}
Violet/Sasha is “faithless, mutable, fickle” (64), lacking the refinement and reliability of an Englishwoman; English, writes Woolf, is too frank a language to describe her. In *Broderie anglaise*, Woolf is limp and colorless; her face “untranslatable” to a foreigner.19

Violet’s conception of Woolf’s uncompromising Englishness is challenged by Vita, who expresses regret in a letter to Violet that she has not had the opportunity to better get to know Woolf, whose un-English side, Vita contends, would have appealed to Violet:

[Virginia] has a twist to her mind which I think would please you,—rather like the sudden scratch of a cat’s claw. Very un-English.

Virginia and I talked about you. She says she thinks of you as being all chestnut and green in colour (I fancy she described you something like that in “Orlando”? I must look it up.) If you had gone to live at Coke’s House, which is not very far away from where she lives, I would have arranged to take you over to see her again. (1941; Jullian and Phillips 227)

Colette enters this set of relations via Violet. Paralleling Vita’s suggestion that Violet could have profited from knowledge of Woolf, Violet suggests in a letter written to Vita in 1920 that she read Colette, hinting that the key to an understanding of her relationship with her husband is hidden in the pages of Colette’s *Chéri*:

I know there is going to be a row sometime today. Denys’s idleness gets on my nerves and I could scream. In a book by Colette, I find the most wonderful description of what I feel . . . It has never been so well expressed. How well she writes, that woman. Have you read ‘Chéri’ by her? It is one of the cleverest books that ever came my way. (Violet to Vita 255)

A jealous Denys Trefusis burned Vita’s letters to Violet. Thus, Violet’s question regarding Colette’s work is unanswered.

Violet met Colette in Paris several years later. Colette’s directness at their first meeting contrasts sharply with the obtuseness Violet encountered in Woolf at their first meeting: “The first time I met Colette she asked me to repeat my name. ‘Violet Trefusis,’ I replied sheepishly. ‘Moi,’ came the bucolic Burgundian voice, ‘je vous appellerai “Géranium”’” (*Don’t Look Round* 90). In contrast to Woolf, the instinctive and intuitive Colette communicates with ease. Violet says of Colette: “She is one of the rare people who have given me the impression of being an
**A DENSE NETWORK OF FRIENDS**

*aliment complet*, both tender and brutal, experienced and incorruptible. I have no hesitation in setting her down as a genius, a genius in the art of loving, and in the art of living, and of describing those arts” (90). Despite being very different in terms of temperament, Violet “ethereal, seeing everything as if through a prism” and Colette “earthy, always in contact with everything” (Goudeket, quoted in *Violet to Vita* 255), the two women formed a close bond.20

Violet describes Colette’s reluctance to “talk shop.” She was particularly reticent about her own books, according to Violet, more at home in the kitchen than in the drawing room. Colette’s quintessential provincial Frenchness defines who she is.

[G]et her on the subjects of flowers, trees, animals, or food, and there was no limit to her knowledge. She had all the peasant’s cult of *le labour*, his fatherly solicitude for the vine; she was a connoisseur of wine of the first category. That is to say, she could tell a *grand cru* from its aroma, and, approximately, the year of its *mise en bouteille*, by tasting it. She was not a native of Burgundy for nothing. (*Don’t Look Round* 88–89)

While the cluster of relations formed around Vita and Violet involved Woolf more closely than her French contemporary, Colette had closer ties with English writer Radclyffe Hall and her lover Una Troubridge. Unlike Violet and Vita, both of whom were married and whose love affair was short-lived, Hall and Troubridge lived together for many years. They left England for Italy after a well-publicized divorce trial in which Troubridge’s husband cited Hall as the reason for the failure of his marriage. While Hall and Troubridge certainly knew Woolf, their relationship was distant and formal, despite a family tie linking Woolf and Troubridge—Woolf had known Troubridge as a child, and her aunt, Julia Cameron, was a friend of Troubridge’s family (Cline 259). Hall was not well received by the Bloomsbury set, who disliked the openness with which she dealt with her homosexuality. According to Richard Ormrod, Troubridge’s biographer, Troubridge and Hall and Woolf, Vita, and Violet did not associate themselves with each other.21 As Sally Cline suggests, Hall’s realistic depiction of gender and sexual identification conflicted with the Bloomsbury group’s approach to the subject (232). While Woolf’s writing is “emotional, elusive, imaginary or symbolic,” for Hall and, Cline suggests, for Vita, too, “realism is the core” (259).22

Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* received poor reviews in Britain. In a letter to Vita, Violet described the book as a “loathsome example of
homosexual literature'" (quoted in Cline 273); Woolf’s responses were condescending. She proclaims the work “dull” and impossible to read (Letters 3: 556). Vita, too, admitted that she could not call the work “good,” but she was outraged at the attempts made to suppress it. Woolf, and along with her Leonard Woolf, joined Vita in support of Hall “on principle,” offering to testify at The Well of Loneliness trial (Ormrod 181–82). At the defense, Hall and Woolf spoke briefly—the Woolfs offered to stand bail for Hall. Woolf’s Orlando, a more elusive treatment of the very same subject, which appeared in 1928 only three months after The Well of Loneliness was banned under the Obscene Publications Act of 1857 in Britain, met with no opposition.

In contrast to her British contemporaries, Colette liked The Well of Loneliness, although she objected to Hall’s portrayal of her protagonist’s feeling of abnormality. Colette criticizes Hall for having Stephen, the heroine, feel abnormal. If she feels abnormal, according to Colette, she is not abnormal. An “abnormal” person, she explains, would not conceive of himself as abnormal:

But there is a point at which I am anti-John, because, without doubt, I am quite an unrefined creature: it is Stephen’s impression of abnormality. Now, what I mean to say is that if an “abnormal person” feels abnormal, he’s not abnormal. Wait, I’ll explain it better: an abnormal person, male or female, should never feel abnormal; on the contrary, a woman who loves another woman (or a man another man) thinks: “What is this world full of monstrous pigs who are different from me?” This is what I’d really like to say to you about the book. (My translation)

Despite her criticism of The Well of Loneliness, Colette admired Hall’s courage. In a letter to Troubridge, she describes Hall as a pioneer: “She is a peaceful builder of great buildings, and I build only bungalows” (my translation). On Hall’s death, Colette wrote: “Her memory is alive to me, and very physical, the beautiful shape of her head, the gilded silver of her hair, and her lovely features, and this Spanish sombrero she liked to wear . . . Certain beings are not meant to die” (my translation).

Reception of Hall’s The Well of Loneliness, then, enables the reader to trace Woolf’s and Colette’s divergent conceptions of sex and sexuality and their treatment in the literary work. Their reception of this particular work also highlights the difference in the environments occupied by both writers, contrasting the closed elitism of Bloomsbury with the openness of contemporary Paris—a cultural divide that Stephen of
Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* is forced to negotiate.

Hall and Troubridge were introduced to Colette in the early 1920s by American writer Natalie Barney, who presided over a literary salon at her home on the rue Jacob in Paris (Ormrod 147). Both women were immediately taken with Colette and formed a friendship with her. In her memoir, *The Life and Death of Radclyffe Hall*, Troubridge, writing about friends in Paris, makes special mention of “the ever enchanting Colette, whose genius we revered while we reveled in her rare personality” (84). In a letter to Evgenia Souline, a Russian nurse residing in France, with whom Hall fell in love and formed a relationship in the latter years of her relationship with Troubridge, Hall describes Colette as overindulgent and excessive, yet an impassioned and “masterly writer”:

> Colette, who loves good food and too much of it; Colette who loves the sexual act and too much of it; Colette who has a peasant’s outlook on money while she overindulges herself. Yes but Colette who adores the wind and the rain, the sea and the earth and the fruits of the earth . . . a great woman . . . and a masterly writer. (Quoted in Cline 214)

As with Vita, Violet, and Virginia, literary links exist—links that shed further light on both Woolf’s and Colette’s conception of homosexuality. Both Hall and Troubridge helped Colette research an English couple, Miss Sarah Ponsonby and Lady Eleanor Butler, known as the Ladies of Llangollen, for Colette’s *Le pur et l’impur* (1932). A true story, the two young women, who in certain ways resemble Troubridge and Hall (and to whom, according to Pichois and Brunet, Colette likens them), eloped together and lived in seclusion in late-eighteenth-century Wales. In 1931 Woolf contemplated writing a review of the journals of Lady Eleanor Butler, the *Hamwood Papers*, but later changed her mind, perhaps suggesting that she was reticent to address the nature of the relationship shared by the two women. They have done themselves too perfectly, she suggests to Ethel Smyth (*Letters* 4: 313). *Chase of the Wild Goose*, a fictional biography written by Mary Gordon, based on the story of the Ladies of Llangollen, was published by the Woolfs in 1936. In *Le pur et l’impur* Colette discusses at some length the journal of Lady Eleanor. The use of occasional French words in the journal suggests a gesture toward a culture less closed than her own. (For further discussion of the Ladies, see chapter 2.)

Troubridge herself translated a number of Colette’s books, including *La maison de Claudine*, and, in 1930, organized an unsuccessful
staging of a theatrical version of _Chéri_ (Ormrod 202). She also sent Colette novels in English. In 1932 in a letter to Troubridge, who had sent her D. H. Lawrence’s novel, Colette wrote, “... and what do you think of this poor childish excited person, the author of _Lady What’s-her-name’s Lover_? It’s terribly high schoolish [...] what a narrow province obscenity is, suffocating and boring” (quoted in Pichois and Brunet 285). These were criticisms to which Colette’s own work was subject. Further, Troubridge suggests, Hall gathered much of the material for _The Well of Loneliness_ in France. In _Me and the Swan_, Naomi Jacob contends that Hall, unable to use a typewriter, used Colette’s famous blue paper instead: “[writing] in clear legible handwriting on thick pale blue paper, which she acquired by permission of the writer, Colette, who used nothing else” (quoted in Brittain 43). In honor of Colette, Hall named one of her dogs Colette and another Mitsou, the
Further emphasizing the density of the network mediating relations between Woolf and Colette, a third set of women, Singer sewing machine heiress Winnie de Polignac, French poet the Comtesse Anna de Noailles, and English suffragist, composer, and writer Ethel Smyth, were all linked socially to both Woolf and Colette. These women also knew each other, as well as Violet, Vita, Hall, and Troubridge. Hall met Polignac and Smyth in London, sharing with the former an interest in Greek culture, and forming with the latter an allegiance in support of the “Vote for women campaign” (Baker 48). In this way, their relationships form a dense network that informs the relationship between contemporary French and English literary cultures.

Polignac knew both Colette and Woolf and, as evidenced by Woolf’s letters, she relayed messages from one writer to the other. A patron of the arts, a bridge of sorts between the artistic and literary cultures of France and Britain, Polignac was interested in the works of Woolf and Colette. Like Violet, she communicated with Woolf in the language of literature, while with Colette she connected in terms of more earthly pursuits. Polignac encouraged Woolf’s reading of Proust and Colette and financed Colette’s foray into the commercial world. Polignac’s mixed heritage, her movement back and forth between England and France, suggests the proximity of the two cultures.

Having asked Ethel Smyth, who had sent her Colette’s work, for the French writer’s address, Woolf hesitates and says instead she will send a message via Polignac: “Thanks for sending on Colette. Very good of you. What’s her real name—address? Never mind: I’ll thank through Mm de P. [Polignac]” (Letters 6: 52). Polignac, the child of a French mother, Isabelle Eugénie Boyer, and an American father, Isaac Singer, founder of the Singer Sewing Machine Company, traveled between France and England. Polignac’s own marriage, like Vita’s, was open. Her husband was bisexual and gave her license to pursue love affairs with whomever she pleased. Among these relationships was one with Violet, on which a play entitled La prisonnière by Edouard Bourdet is said to have been based (Souhami 147; de Cossart 174). According to Souhami, Troubridge and Hall saw the play at the Théâtre Femina in Paris in 1926. “Awful rot, but fun,’ Una said of it” (147). In the 1930s, interested in the activities of the Bloomsbury group, Polignac sought out Woolf (de Cossart 201–2). After disappointment with The Years, the English writer enjoyed listening to Polignac’s stories and news from the French literary scene (de Cossart 201–2). The two women wrote to each other. A favorite subject of theirs was Marcel Proust, whose work...
Woolf admired greatly. Polignac’s mediation of Woolf’s relationship with Proust reflects Woolf’s apprehension at attempting to take inspiration from Proust. In the same way that she marveled at Colette’s command of the French language but kept her distance, she feels unable to imitate Proust, precisely because he is writing in a different language: “I wonder if this next lap will be influenced by Proust? I think his French language, tradition, &c, prevents that: yet his command of every resource is so extravagant that one can hardly fail to profit, & must not flinch, through cowardice” (Diary 2: 234).

Polignac was also a close friend of Colette (see figure 7). While Colette and her first husband, Willy, frequented Polignac’s musical salon in the 1920s (Francis and Gontier, Colette 107), it was only later, according to de Cossart, on the death of Anna de Noailles, a mutual friend, that the bond between the two women was cemented. Descriptions of Polignac’s relationship with Colette echo Violet’s. Rather than engage each other on literary topics, Polignac and Colette indulge themselves together in material things. At Colette’s house, Polignac enjoys the domestic comfort she cannot find at home (“the princess would settle down comfortably at home in Colette’s house, whereas in her own she often had the appearance of a slightly embarrassed guest” [de Cossart 198]). “Over a ‘picnic’ of hot wine and ‘a debauch of cheese’” (198), they share dreams of a simpler existence. Polignac’s anglicized French, suggests de Cossart, complemented Colette’s Burgundian French: “Both naturally witty, clever and down to earth, in public they could keep up an entertaining repartee or a complementary dialogue, their distinctive accents contrasting delightfully with each other, Colette’s rich, rolling Burgundian and Winnaretta’s dry anglicized French” (de Cossart 197–98). Polignac showered Colette with gifts, including a table that perched like a bridge over the bed where Colette, crippled with arthritis in later years, liked to work (Francis and Gontier, Colette 328–29).

Like Polignac, Noailles and Smyth mediated between Woolf and Colette, but less directly. Each had a strong tie with one of the two writers and a weaker tie with the other, Noailles closer to Colette and Smyth to Woolf. Smyth sent Colette’s work to Woolf, including her speech honoring Noailles as she succeeded her at the Belgian Academy. Noailles chaired a French committee that awarded Woolf a literary prize, designed to honor English writers who informed the French about England. Noailles’s frailty suggests a resemblance to Woolf, and Smyth’s directness recalls Colette.
Noailles, Romanian by birth, was married to a Frenchman. Among the best-known writers of their time, Noailles’s renown has not survived abroad as has Colette’s. Contemporaries describe the two women as opposites. Polignac, Trefusis writes, liked to contrast Colette’s provincialness, she was the *percheron* (from La Perche), with Noailles’s pedigree. The French writer Jean Cocteau describes Colette as the sun, Noailles as the moon (*Colette* 46–47). Such characterizations suggest parallels between Noailles and Woolf: they respond to Colette’s person and her prose in a similar fashion. According to Noailles, Colette appears “tired of dissimulation, provocative, enigmatic, sure of herself, she is as calm as a sibyl and as enigmatic as an African goddess, at once cat and tiger” (my translation). Her writing, Noailles asserts, is similarly opulent and fertile.
I will not describe Colette’s genius here; let her use an entire dictionary, she will hollow out a home for herself there; she will produce in spurts and with labor, she says, a succulent, fiery, organic work, in which all the terms will appear to have been rifled and distributed without, however, any addition that might weigh down a story that takes as its authority life and necessity. (My translation)36

Noailles’s connection to Woolf is a literary one. She presided over the Prix Femina Vie Heureuse–Bookman Prize. The purpose of the prize, awarded in France and in England, was to reward a work that informed one culture about the other.37 Woolf’s reaction to the prize reflects her ambivalent relationship with reception abroad, as well as her own faltering self-esteem.38 Woolf coveted the prize but received it reluctantly for To the Lighthouse, in 1928, calling it “the most insignificant and ridiculous of prizes” (quoted in Caws and Wright 56). The Woolfs’ library also contains a copy of Noailles’s Les éblouissements (1907), suggesting that Woolf was familiar with the work of her contemporary. Woolf also comments in her diary on Noailles’s death.39

Smyth is one of several friends who sent Colette’s books to Woolf (see figure 8). Hence, Smyth courts Woolf via Colette, as Violet courts Vita. Further, just as Noailles in a sense doubles as Woolf for Colette, so Smyth’s flamboyance and directness make of her a Colette-like figure for Woolf. Often in Paris, Smyth probably heard of Colette and of her work via Polignac, whom she met and with whom she fell in love in 1903. De Cossart calls Polignac’s “collision” with Smyth, who arrived “meteor-like,” “unfortunate.” He suggests that Smyth behaved in a brash, heavy-handed way; and when rejected by Polignac, who preferred “young, beautiful and submissive women,” she set to turning Polignac’s friends, including Noailles, against her. After Smyth’s passions had calmed a little, the two women became close friends, and Polignac did much to promote Smyth’s music (86–88). Collis cites a letter that Polignac wrote to Smyth in 1940: “‘My heart is full of gratitude for all you put in my life, your music, your incomparable singing, even your bouts of anger. It will be something I remember to the last. . . . I think of you so much, my darling’” (87).

Woolf’s relationship with Smyth is known for its problems. “We’re hopelessly and incorrigibly different,” Woolf wrote of Smyth in a letter (Letters 5: 237). Long an admirer of Woolf’s work, especially taken by those sentences in A Room of One’s Own about women in her own field, music, Smyth first contacted Woolf in 1930.40 “‘I want to see you, if you do not detest the idea too much? You might (who knows?) quite like me
if we were to meet’’ (quoted in Collis 175). This hesitation set the tone for a relationship that was often difficult. Echoing Vita, Violet, and Freund, Smyth laments the difficulty of getting close to Woolf: “‘[o]ne can’t have relations with [Virginia] as with others. The fact is you have to take what you can get of Virginia . . .’” (quoted in St John 222). “‘When she comes into the room it is as if one from another world entered. Her distinction? So exquisitely delicate, yet such sense of strength . . . The only thing she can’t do well is . . . laugh. ‘Le rire fidèle’ is not her line, and that’s odd for there is occasionally a very hilarious streak in her work, and as for her letters! Ah!!’” (quoted in St John 224). In response, Woolf portrays Smyth as brash and shabby, but a great talent. “‘She has descended upon me like a wolf on the fold in purple and gold, terrifically strident and enthusiastic—I like her—she is as shabby as a washerwoman and shouts and sings’’” (quoted in Collis 177). Smyth’s directness and frenetic enthusiasm recall Violet’s description of Colette; her purple and gold, Freund’s description of Colette’s “symphony of color” (114).

Thus, while clear evidence of a strong individual tie between Colette and Woolf is not available—it is unlikely the two writers ever met face to
face—the web of mutual acquaintances confirms their social proximity and suggests a plethora of other possible connections. The shared literary projects, such as Hall and Troubridge’s collaboration with Colette, Woolf’s, Violet’s, and Vita’s literary sparring, and Troubridge’s translations of Colette’s work; the exchanging of texts across national borders, such as Smyth’s gift of Colette’s work to Woolf, Violet’s mention of Colette’s work to Vita, Polignac’s talk of Proust and Colette to Woolf, and Troubridge’s offer of Lawrence’s work to Colette; the personal support and professional interest, evidenced in letters and memoirs, exchanged by this network of women—these details support the contention that the relationship between Woolf and Colette had an impact on the lives and work of both writers. Further, the responses to the two writers of their contemporaries, for example, that of Freund, of Violet, and of Hall and Troubridge, allow us to locate not only Colette and Woolf, but also those other writers who form part of the network, in a contemporary international scene comprising two tightly interconnected cultures, French and English.