“Ces Deux Opiniâtres Amies”: Reading Colette’s *Le pur et l’impur* as a Response to Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*

I have this moment, while having my bath, conceived an entire new book—a sequel to *A Room of Ones Own*—about the sexual life of women: to be called Professions for Women perhaps—Lord how exciting! (Virginia Woolf, 1931, *Diary* 4: 6)

It is generally agreed that Virginia Woolf’s projection of a sequel to *A Room of One’s Own* about “the sexual life of women” was never written. *Three Guineas*, a logical choice as sequel to *A Room*, treats war, not sex—a reflection, as Juliet Dusinberre has suggested, of where Woolf’s concerns lay in 1938 with the specter of a second world war looming. However, war was not the only thing that kept Woolf from her sequel. A certain reticence on the issue of sex seems to have held her back. In the essay “Professions of Women,” the title considered for the sequel, based on a lecture delivered a day after the original diary entry, the topic—“telling the truth about my own experiences as a body”—is broached, only to be deemed too shocking (62). Further, in her penultimate novel, *The Years*, another sequel candidate (identified by way of a later annotation to the first diary entry), the sexual life of the female characters is addressed in only a very marginal fashion—more often than not in negative rather than positive terms.

Concurrent to Woolf’s conception of a book about the sexual life of women, Colette was at work on just such a piece: *Le pur et l’impur*, the three elliptical dots of its original title, *Ces plaisirs . . . qu’on nomme à la légère physiques*, appearing to gesture toward and intersect with the ellipses of both *A Room* and *Three Guineas*. Colette’s text follows *A Room* in terms of style and structure, while it centers on issues of female
sexuality. Woolf’s projection and Colette’s execution of this project draw these two writers together while simultaneously setting them apart. Colette’s *Le pur* is at once sequel to and elaboration on *A Room*, and it is its undoing as it challenges and toys with the assertions of *A Room*.

While it is uncertain whether Colette read Woolf’s *A Room*, which preceded *Le pur* by three years, or any of her other works—although we do know the former was available in Paris in, among other places, Sylvia Beach’s Shakespeare and Company, where Victoria Ocampo found Woolf’s *A Room* in 1929 (Lee 660; Meyer 102)—there is sufficient evidence to suggest that *Le pur* might be read as a response of sorts to the earlier text. Overlaps, I show, exist not only in terms of the style, structure, and content of the works but also in terms of the circumstances of their respective composition.

Implicit in *Le pur* is a description of the relationship of Colette’s work with Woolf’s *A Room*. In one episode, Colette recounts the true story of the Ladies of Llangollen, two English women of wealthy families who eloped together and set up home in rural Wales in the eighteenth century. The diaries of the older of the two Ladies, Lady Eleanor, collected under the title *The Hamwood Papers* (1930), provide the foundation for Colette’s version of the Ladies’ lives.

Colette’s choice of the story of the Ladies for *Le pur* suggests ties to Woolf and *A Room*. Woolf knew of the story of the Ladies of Llangollen and in fact in 1927 sketched a plan to use their story for the novel that later became *Orlando*. The Ladies came up at many different points in Woolf’s life: Woolf’s father Leslie Stephen included a reference to the Ladies in his *Dictionary of Literary Biography*; Woolf would have also found references to the Ladies in *Wild Wales* by George Borrow, a writer on whom her father wrote a short article in 1880; at fifteen, in 1897, Woolf read about the Ladies in John Lockhart’s *Life of Sir Walter Scott*, a birthday present from her father; in 1907 Woolf’s review of E. V. Lucas’s *A Swan and Her Friends*, which contains a version of the Ladies’ story, appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*; in 1931, in a letter to Ethel Smyth, Woolf writes of her decision not to write a review of *The Hamwood Papers*, claiming that they had done themselves so perfectly; and in 1936 the Woolfs’ Hogarth Press published a fictional biography based on the Ladies, *Chase of the Wild Goose* by Mary Gordon.

The Englishness of the Ladies, their literariness—they are “enivrées du roman” (127) ("drunk on novels"), especially French novels—their self-sufficiency despite material difficulties, the discreet nature of their relationship, and their creation of a room of their own—the Ladies are
furnished with “a well-stocked library, a delightful site and view . . . A calm and peaceful life, a perfect friendship” (116)—also ties them to Woolf herself and to A Room and its focus on material things.8 Like the Ladies, Woolf’s lesbianism was discreet; like them, she was a great admirer of French literature. A specific correlation exists between the Ladies of Llangollen and the two working women of A Room, Chloe and Olivia, the imaginary protagonists of the novel of Woolf’s fictional contemporary Mary Carmichael.

As several critics have suggested, Woolf’s Chloe and Olivia episode reads as an implicit reference to the controversy surrounding Radclyffe Hall’s novel, The Well of Loneliness, banned on obscenity charges for its explicit treatment of homosexuality only months prior to the publication of A Room (see Marcus, Languages 163–87; Cline 282–84).9 In the lines preceding her discussion of Chloe and Olivia in A Room, Woolf asks that audience members check that Sir Chartres Biron, the magistrate presiding at the Well trial, is not among their number. At the very end of A Room, Woolf also mentions Sir Archibald Bodkin, who was the Director of Public Prosecutions (111). According to Marcus and Cline, Judith Shakespeare, Woolf’s fictional sister for William, also constitutes another possible Room reference to Hall, who was renowned for her claim to have descended from Shakespeare’s daughter Susannah Shakespeare. Hall’s “coded appearance,” to borrow Cline’s term, in Woolf’s A Room ties it to Colette’s Le pur. Hall and her lover Una Troubridge befriended Colette in Paris in the early 1920s and in fact helped Colette gain access to a copy of The Hamwood Papers. In part, perhaps, as a result of this collaboration, as well as similarities in the status (and the style; see figures 9 and 10) of the Ladies’ lives and those of Hall and Troubridge, Colette identified Hall and Troubridge with Lady Eleanor and Lady Sarah.10 This identification provides a parallel to the Chloe and Olivia–Hall and Troubridge tie. Hall and Troubridge thus function as mediators between Woolf and Colette, A Room and Le pur, on a number of levels. The story of their lives and works appears in both Le pur and A Room (when Colette asks us to imagine the Ladies of Llangollen in 1930, one hundred years after Sarah Ponsonby’s death, does she invite us to see Hall and Troubridge, or Hall’s Stephen and Mary in The Well?). Their involvement with both writers suggests that they provided Colette with access to A Room, a copy of the text, or word of the text, as they provided her with access to The Hamwood Papers.

Indeed, Colette reads Lady Eleanor’s diary as she would have had to read Woolf’s A Room in 1930 (and Hall’s The Well): in the original, although, she admits, slowly and with some difficulty. A Room was not
translated into French until 1951, twenty-two years after its original publication date in Britain and the United States. Her reconstruction of the story of the Ladies, like her revision of, or provision of a sequel to, *A Room*, is undertaken without protocol, illicitly. As Elizabeth Mavor suggests, in reference specifically to the passage from *Le pur* where Colette imagines the Ladies a hundred years on in 1930, not 1830, Colette’s interpretation of the Ladies, though sympathetic, is “very much in terms of her own times” (206). Colette “translates” Lady Eleanor’s diaries quite liberally into her native language as she translates
Woolf’s *A Room*. She changes things around and does not apologize for having done so; she pays no attention to chronology. “Je traduis ça et là, j’intervertis et ne m’en excuse point” (134) (“I translate here and there, I reverse the order, and I do not excuse myself at all” [114 n.]); “je néglige, à dessein, toutes les dates de ce ‘journal’” (136) (“intentionally, I neglect all the dates of this journal” [124]). What intrigues Colette about the story of the Ladies is what is missing from the work: first, specific references to the sexual life of “ces deux opiniâtres amies” (125) (“these two opinionated ladies” [115])—only one mention of a shared bed or bedroom (“je ne découvre, sauf erreur, qu’une seule fois les mots...” [115]).
‘la chambre,’ et ‘notre lit’” (136) (“and if I mistake not, the words ‘the bedroom’ and ‘our bed’ occur but once” [124])—and second, the voice of the younger Lady, Sarah, “la proie” (the victim): “What I would have liked to have is the diary that would reveal the victim, the diary that the younger of this couple, Sarah Ponsonby, might have kept [. . . ] The secret here is Sarah, who says nothing, and embroiders. What a light would be shed by a diary she kept” (125–26). Similarly, I want to argue that what draws Colette to A Room is the unsaid, the gaps, ellipses, and prohibitions in the text, the references to the body not made, in the words of Woolf: “something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say” (“Professions” 61).

However, Colette’s interest in these omissions in both cases, she asserts, is not a lascivious one—she aims to respect the Ladies’ story as she aims to respect Woolf’s: “je ne suis pas un lecteur ordinaire” (138) (“I am not an ordinary reader” [127]), she asserts. Colette’s subject is not eroticism (for the male reader) but rather kinship (for the female reader). The gaps in Lady Eleanor’s diaries mark the efforts of the Ladies not to be “la parodie d’un couple” (138–39) (“the parody of a couple” [127]); the gaps in Woolf’s A Room result from her efforts not to engage with the male critic, historian, or writer on his own terms, not to replace his history with hers, but rather to provide a supplement to it, as she suggests in A Room (45). Thus, when Colette fills the gaps in Lady Eleanor’s diaries, she imagines Lady Sarah and Lady Eleanor in a comforting embrace, “sleeping together, lying awake together, experiencing together nocturnal terrors,” and in a relationship that involves everyday life, material things (127).

A Shared Structure and Style

Woolf’s A Room began its life as a lecture, conceived in part while at Thomas Hardy’s funeral in January of 1928, delivered twice at the women’s colleges Newnham and Girton in Cambridge in October of the same year (Diary 3: 173). The lecture, the originals of which do not exist, was subsequently divided, rewritten as six pieces, and published a year later in 1929. On completing A Room, Woolf writes in her diary that she felt constrained by facts and the proximity of her audience in this case. She suggests that the work, although important, is “watery and flimsy and pitched in too high a voice,” and that it has “an uneasy life in it; you feel the creature arching its back and galloping on” (A
She anticipates that her friends will not like the work, that it will elicit little criticism “except of the evasive jocular kind, from Lytton [Strachey], Roger [Fry] and Morgan [E. M. Forster],” and that she will “be attacked as a feminist and hinted at for a Sapphist” (A Writer’s Diary 145). Woolf downplays the significance of her lectures, describing them as for an audience of young people (those “who have not yet come of age” [A Room 104]) in need of some encouragement: “But my ‘book’ isn’t a book—its [sic] only talks to girls” (Letters 4: 102).

Colette’s Le pur, nine loosely connected portraits, also originated as a series of separate pieces, among them a supplement to Don Juan written as part of a series of supplements to great works (Œuvres 3: x). Biographer Michèle Sarde suggests that Colette came up with the idea for Le pur while sailing on the North Sea (in British territories?) aboard the yacht of Henri de Rothschild, Eros, a name appropriate to Colette’s topic (400). Le pur was published under the title Ces plaisirs . . . qu’on nomme à la légère physiques in 1932, following the abrupt interruption of its serialization in the French magazine Gringoire in 1931, due to poor reviews from readers. Among other titles Colette considered for Le pur were Écumes (Foam), Remous (Eddy, Eddies), and La fourbe (Treachery). In a letter to Hélène Picard, Colette says that while “Remous fits the subject matter (or absence of subject matter) better,” Écumes is “the prettier word” (Letters from Colette 116). Nicole Ward Jouve has suggested that the first of these titles (Écumes) ties Colette’s work to Woolf’s The Waves, published the year before Le pur (Colette 168). Colette, like Woolf, defines Le pur in terms of what it is not—it “isn’t a novel” (Letters from Colette 128). Maurice Goudeket describes it as “le plus difficile de ses livres, et le plus nouveau” (84) (“the most difficult and the newest of her books”). Like Woolf, Colette downplays the importance of her work, which she nonetheless predicts will one day be considered her best book: “It’s about old love related things, deals with unisexual loves—in short, it does what it can”; and to Polaire, “this book that is only a gallery of sins” (my translation). Celebrated by a few, Le pur disconcerted most readers, according to Goudeket (85). Sarde notes that Colette’s friends must have had some difficulty recognizing their Colette in Le pur and an earlier novel, La naissance du jour: “After turning fifty,” Sarde explains, “after her second divorce and the unpleasantness it entailed, her books changed. They began to turn slowly back to the past, to a journey back in time, away from the present, in a kind of renunciation” (408).

Both writers experiment with the form of the work. In Le pur Colette, as Marcus has suggested of Woolf in A Room, “[invents] a
female language to subvert the languages of the patriarchy” (Languages 187). Both texts couch their inquiry in terms of a voyage or city tour—Woolf on the campus of a fictional Oxbridge college and at Fernham, and then in London; Colette in Paris and in the French provinces. Woolf and Colette perhaps find common ground in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Les rêveries du promeneur solitaire* or his *Confessions*, in Montaigne’s *Essais* (all favorites of Woolf’s), or in the work of their British contemporary, Rebecca West, such as her essay “The Strange Necessity,” which mixes literary criticism with a walk around Paris. In each case, the mobility of the flâneur-narrator matches the meandering, “stream-of-consciousness”—like prose and the grammatical volubility of the sentence, broken frequently by dashes, ellipses, semicolons, and code names, usually initials (examples include von X. and Mr A in *A Room* and X and D in *Le pur*). A series of loosely related encounters, conversations with real people, and engagements with authors via their texts shape the development of ideas in the work. “A game of reverberations, echoes, relations” (“tout un jeu de rappels, d’échos, de relations”) ties these disparate episodes together in Woolf’s *A Room*, as they do in Colette’s *Le pur* (*Œuvres* 3: 1509).

The tone of both works is satirical, a matter of some seriousness wrapped in a light veil of humor. Fact masquerades as fiction and fiction as fact. The mock anonymity and objectivity of the narrator (in *A Room*, Woolf’s narrator asserts: “Here then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please—it is not a matter of any importance)” [5]; in *Le pur*, among her homosexual male colleagues “Absent yet present, a translucent witness, [Colette’s narrator] enjoyed an indefinable peace, accompanied by a kind of conspiratorial pride” [139]) and the subject (frequently coded with initials) in both works raises questions about the relation of subject and object, subjectivity and objectivity—offering only an uncertain foothold in each case. Teased and led on by the narrator, the subject is invited to condemn himself or herself in both of these works.

“Two pictures disjointed and disconnected”

In the opening pages of the first chapter of *A Room*, Woolf’s narrator introduces the subject of her polemic. She has been asked to address the question of women and fiction. This topic will dictate the shape of her text, which, she suggests, will be a sort of fiction: “Lies,” she writes, “will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up
with them” (4). What follows is a series of investigatory trips, onto the lawn, into the chapel, and into the library of the Oxbridge college she invents for the purpose of her writing, and to the fiction and history shelves of the British Museum in pursuit of the elusive solution to the question on which the text opened.

*Le pur* opens in a similar way, as Colette’s narrator, like Woolf’s, engaged in a “professional assignment” of sorts, fashions her topic first in fictional terms. Her subject, unlike Woolf’s, is not suggested to her, but comes to her at the end of the second chapter of *Le pur*: “The veiled face of a woman, refined, disillusioned, [skilled in deception and delicacy; my addition] is a suitable preface to this book, which will sadly treat of sensual pleasure” (25). Thus, Colette, as she focuses on sensual pleasure, also, like Woolf, treats women and fiction, women and “l’art de feindre” (“the art of pretending”). Again what follows is a series of trespasses in search of an answer. In Colette’s *Le pur*, however, an inversion of sorts takes place: the vaulted roofs of the British Museum of Woolf’s *A Room* become the high ceilings of the atelier/opium den in Paris.

Woolf considers four possible ways to approach her topic—“women and fiction”—“women and what they are like [ . . . ] women and the fiction that they write [ . . . ] women and the fiction that is written about them,” or a combination of the three (3). She dismisses the easier option—which would include “a few remarks about Fanny Burney; a few more about Jane Austen; a tribute to the Brontës”—and embarks on a more complex journey, one she doubts she will ever complete: “I should never be able to come to a conclusion” (3). To do her duty as a lecturer, that is, to hand her audience “a nugget of pure truth,” might prove an impossibility (4). Personalizing her quest, she offers instead to give her “opinion upon one minor point”—the crux of the essay—that is, that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (4). She begins with an account, a story of the two days preceding her arrival, of how she “made [the question] work in and out of my daily life” (4).

Having been ushered off the Oxbridge lawn, a place off-limits to the uninitiated, by a beadle, “a curious-looking object,” she is drawn to the library in pursuit of several manuscripts (6). Her interest in these (significantly for my focus here) is revision, rewriting. Woolf’s narrator, remembering Charles Lamb’s assertion that Milton’s decision to change the words in his poem “Lycidas” (the manuscript of which is held in the British Museum library) was “a sort of sacrilege” (7), wonders which words those were. A study of revisions, she feels, might be useful: she believes that a look at alterations in the manuscript of Thackeray’s
Esmond, held in the same library, will reveal whether the eighteenth-century style of the text was natural to Thackeray or not. However, she comes up against another obstacle: she is again denied access based on her sex (9). Arriving next at the chapel, she elects to remain on the outside and to examine the edifice and its contents from a distance, rather than to attempt to gain admission: “But the outside of these magnificent buildings is often as beautiful as the inside” (8). The theme of inclusion and exclusion introduced here runs through to the end of the chapter; it sets the stage for Woolf’s focus on difference, highlighted by the juxtaposition of two related but disjointed scenes.

The latter part of this first chapter includes the description of two meals attended by the narrator: the first, lavish and sumptuous on the fictional Oxbridge campus; the second, meager and bland, at a fictional women’s college called Fernham. Woolf’s narrator juggles here questions of fact and fiction, truth and illusion, laughter and anguish: “two pictures disjointed and disconnected” (19). At the first of these meals, in spite of the “profound, subtle and subterranean glow” lit “halfway down one’s spine” by the sumptuous sauces and salads and the free-flowing wines, Woolf’s narrator detects a lack or a gap (embodied by the tail-less Manx cat she sees from the window) (11), a difference between this party and a similar one that took place before the war, between the prewar illusion that produced the poetry of Tennyson and Christina Rossetti (Woolf has the one poet harmoniously responding to the other) and the postwar truth, the latter being the preferable state of affairs, Woolf suggests uncertainly. At this point in the text, woven in with Woolf’s cogitations are both the poetry of Rossetti and Woolf’s own poetic prose: “purples and golds burn in window-panes like the beat of an excitable heart” (16); “[t]he windows of the building, curved like ships’ windows among the generous waves of red brick, changed from lemon to silver under the flight of the quick spring clouds” (17).

In contrast to the imposing buildings of Oxbridge, an institution founded solidly on the gold and silver of England’s leaders (10), the unendowed Fernham, the setting for Woolf’s second meal, is set apart and fronted with wild, open gardens. The narrator’s mother and the mother of Mary Seton, a science professor with whom Woolf’s narrator sits and talks after a meal with the Fernham students, raised children, not money (which would anyway until forty-eight years previous have fallen into the hands of their husbands). Woolf’s narrator marks the discrepancy between Oxbridge and Fernham in terms of the sensual. Water takes the place of wine at Fernham; prunes and custard and a plain gravy
soup the place of the Oxbridge partridges “with all their retinue of sauces and salads [. . . ]; their potatoes, thin as coins but not so hard; their sprouts, foliated as rosebuds but more succulent” (10–11). This chapter comes to a close as the narrator returns to her inn, contemplating as she goes the impact of poverty and tradition, and of inclusion and exclusion, on the mind of a writer.

The first two sections of *Le pur*, like the opening chapter of *A Room*, juxtapose two (disconnected) episodes, two disjointed ideas (truth and illusion): in *A Room*, lunch at Oxbridge and dinner at Fernham; in *Le pur*, two meetings with Charlotte, both of which take place at the same opium den. The overlap of Charlotte’s name with that of Colette suggests that Charlotte functions as a double of sorts. The first of these opening sections finds Colette’s narrator as a visitor, a trespasser, like Woolf’s narrator in *A Room*, one not attuned to her surroundings, which here consist of a vast studio (like a market, “comme une halle”) with faux oriental decoration. The second finds her more at ease in conversation, again like Woolf, with a single female interlocutor.

In the opening scene, the aroma of the opium smoke hanging listlessly in the air relaxes the narrator, stimulates her appetite, and endows her with a general sense of well-being (parallel to the optimism with which Woolf begins her inquiry). The narrator enjoys the glow of the veiled lights and the white almond-shaped flames of the opium lamps. The narrator sees a head (with “hair slicked down like the hair of a drowned person” (4), reminiscent of Woolf’s tail-less Manx) leaning over a balustrade but is unable to discern if it belongs to a man or a woman. Colette’s narrator’s contemplation is interrupted by an unnamed colleague, encountered by chance, whose questioning of the purpose of her visit, like that of Woolf’s beadle, is accusatory—she is there to watch, not to participate, he suggests; she is incapable of indulging in this base pleasure—an accusation, however, that Colette’s narrator confesses is not misdirected.

At this point in the text, the narrator is interrupted by the voice of a woman: “a furry, sweet, yet husky voice that had the qualities of a hard and thick skinned velvety peach” (6). This first intrusion of a woman’s voice, Charlotte’s, into the text (paralleling Woolf’s efforts to enter the library, although whereas Woolf attempts to break in, Charlotte’s voice breaks out) is cut short by the voice of the male lover, first with a “non [ . . . ] elle n’est pas ici pour ça” (10) (“no [ . . . ] she didn’t come here to sing [for that]” [7]) and then, the smashing of a cup and “oui, elle est là. Elle est ici avec moi “ (11) (“Yes, she’s here. She’s with me” [7]). Her third interruption comes a page later in the form of a cry of rhythmic
orgasmic pleasure, this time permitted because in the service of her partner:

But from the depths of this very silence a sound imperceptibly began in a woman’s throat, at first husky, then clear, asserting its firmness and amplitude as it was repeated, becoming clear and full like the notes the nightingale repeats and accumulates until they pour out in a flood of arpeggios . . . (8)23

On leaving the opium den, Colette’s narrator encounters Charlotte, now wrapped in a coat, veiled, and they agree to share a cab home. Stepping outside with her companion, Colette’s narrator revels in the fresh air, a moment reminiscent of Woolf’s celebration of the exterior of the chapel in the first section of *A Room*—“L’air libre, frais, encore obscur, me désaltéra” (14) (“It was still dark outside, and the cool night revived me” [10]). The figure cut by Charlotte takes the narrator by surprise: a woman of forty-five with a short nose and a fleshy face, she looks, according to the narrator, like the favorite models of Renoir, beauties of 1875 (14/10). Something about her is out of place and out of fashion, démodé. While the conversation begins with banalities, Colette’s narrator once again focuses on Charlotte’s voice: “What seduction was in her voice, how delightful the way it rasped out certain syllables and the suave and defeated way it had of letting the ends of phrases fall into the lower register . . .” (11).24 Reflecting the subdued tenor of her voice, Charlotte cautiously urges Colette on arriving home to get out of the taxi a slight distance from her door, so as not to compromise her reputation: the hour is late. When Colette refuses, Charlotte responds: “C’est beau, la liberté. Moi . . . moi, je ne suis pas libre” (17) (“Freedom is a wonderful thing. But as for me . . . I’m not free” [13]), echoing Woolf’s focus on access in the opening chapter of *A Room*.

Time passes between Colette’s narrator’s first and second encounters with Charlotte. Colette’s narrator does not look for Charlotte. Instead, she prefers to imagine Charlotte, to keep her in the realm of fiction, for fear of destroying “the mystery we attach to people whom we know only casually” (15).25 However, an encounter does occur at a book signing, leading to the second meeting at the same opium den. This bridging encounter serves to remind the reader of the status of the narrator—she is the author, Colette—and of the (possibly) fictional status of the text. Colette’s second visit to the opium den contrasts with the first, as does Woolf’s first meal at Oxbridge and her second at Fernham. This time, she finds Charlotte alone, without façade or pretense:
are-headed, very neat, and looking rather plump in her black dress, she had not donned the ritual kimono” (16). Their location affords a sense of anonymity—the opium den is “as accessible and inhospitable as a railway station,” according to the narrator, and neither woman knows whose place it is (16). Indeed, Colette’s narrator wishes that this anonymity extended to her own identity. As strangers, Colette’s narrator and Charlotte can confide in each other and are able to understand one another in a way good friends cannot. With Charlotte’s lover out of town, she is enjoying, she says, a respite from lying—a comment that bemuses Colette’s narrator. Why lie, she asks? And the narrator recognizes of what Charlotte’s lie consists, “mélodieux et miséricordieux” (23) (“melodious and merciful” [18]), of what a woman’s fiction must consist. Her lies are a “romanesque recompense,” which give the lover the illusion of superiority, a strength he does not possess in reality: “those full notes reiterated again and again, precipitated until their trembling equilibrium broke in a climax of torrential sobbing . . .” (18). Colette recognizes Charlotte as a “woman who knew how to reassure men”:

This substantial Charlotte was a female genius, indulging in tender subterfuge, consideration, and self-denial. And here she was, this woman who knew how to reassure men, sitting beside me, limbs relaxed, idly waiting to take up again the duty of one who loves best: the daily imposture [ . . . ] (18)

Instead of the debauched confession Colette’s narrator had hoped for from Charlotte, the woman turns, as does Mary Seton in A Room, to the material, to the economics of pleasure—an explanation of how business is transacted in the opium den. “Une aussi claire ordonnance” (25) (“so straightforward an accounting”) of debauchery, says the narrator, would have troubled any listener other than herself. Charlotte does not conform to the stereotype of woman, those who “guetter [et] convoiter les maladies de l’homme [pour qu’elles puiscent] tendre les mains à tout vase souillé, tout linge moite . . .” (26) (“hope and pray for their man to fall ill so they can handle dirty basins and clammy rags” [21]); rather, like Mary Seton, she is, the narrator surmises, wise and controlled. Like Woolf, Colette ends this first section with a consideration of the senses. At this point Charlotte puts up her guard, distancing her heart and her body from that of the narrator. Charlotte remains a mystery to the narrator, her sex “inexorable.” The word inexorable, the narrator suggests, describes the bundle of forces to which we have been able to
give only one name—her book’s subject, the senses. Why not, she asks, refer to it in the singular—one sense of which the other five are subparts, sense (pleasure?) dominating all of them—in this way suggesting a single, unifying theme for her work. Who, asks Colette’s narrator, posing the central question around which the work turns, has the ability or the power to fix the unstable limits of the empire of the senses?

The narrator’s second interview with Charlotte comes to a close with a return to order—“protoculairement” (30) (“punctiliously” [25]). Charlotte utters a banality—one that significantly ties Le pur to A Room with its reference to keys, locks, and access: “The only really masterful sound a man makes in a house is when, on the entrance landing, he fumbles with his key in the lock of the door . . . ” (25). What remains of Charlotte for the narrator—the basis on which the rest of Le pur will be built—are “ténèbres,” shadows (the enigmatic figure of a veiled woman), which the narrator has no plans to dissipate, echoing Woolf’s assertion that her inquiry precludes a coming to a conclusion: “When I think of Charlotte, I embark upon a drifting souvenir of nights graced neither by sleep nor certitude” (25).

“Give nothing—take nothing”

From the Oxbridge campus, A Room shifts to London. In the second section of A Room, Woolf’s narrator makes her way to the British Museum in pursuit of “the pure fluid, the essential oil of truth” (25), recalling the later title of Colette’s work. She pursues questions suggested to her during her trip to Oxbridge: “Why did men drink wine and women water? Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor? What effect has poverty on fiction? What conditions are necessary for the creation of works of art?” (25). Material things concern Woolf’s narrator at this point. As she enters the museum from the bustling London street, she blurs the line dividing the two, the high from the low, anticipating her request that the contents of the museum shelves address fundamental questions about material things: “London was like a workshop. London was like a machine. We were all being shot backwards and forwards on this plain foundation to make some pattern. The British Museum was another department of the factory” (26). The domed head of the British Museum buzzes with responses; however, all are proffered by men and all are different. While the narrator scribbles “contradictory jottings” erratically in her notebook (“it was distressing, it was bewildering, it was humiliating,” writes Woolf, “[t]ruth had run through my
fingers. Every drop had escaped” [30]), a picture emerges from the chaos: “It was the face and figure of Professor von X. engaged in writing his monumental work entitled *The Mental, Moral and Physical Inferiority of the Female Sex*” (31). An unattractive man, “heavily built,” with “a great jowl” and “small eyes,” and “very red in the face,” Professor von X.’s motives for an attack on women bemuse Woolf’s narrator (31). Was he rejected by his wife in favor of a younger, more handsome man, or—and here Woolf turns his own discipline on him—was he laughed at as a baby by a pretty child? She concludes that it is anger that motivates the professor and all of those others who write so profusely about women, but anger “disguised and complex, not anger simple and open” (32).

Later, seeking out lunch in a restaurant near the British Museum, Woolf’s narrator’s search continues. A paper abandoned by a previous diner confirms her findings in the museum. A visitor from another planet could not fail to notice, suggests Woolf’s narrator, that “England is under the rule of patriarchy,” and she returns to the professor:

Nobody in their senses could fail to detect the dominance of the professor. His was the power and the money and the influence. He was the proprietor of the paper and its editor and its sub-editor. He was the Foreign Secretary and the Judge. He was the cricketer; he owned the race-horses and the yachts. He was the director of the company that pays two hundred per cent to its shareholders [. . .] With the exception of the fog he seemed to control everything. Yet he was angry. (33–34)

Woolf’s narrator attributes this anger to a concern regarding his own superiority and the potential loss thereof. She affirms this idea with a foray into “daily life,” remembering when Z (another anon), “most humane, most modest of men,” his vanity wounded, condemned her contemporary Rebecca West—a real name among all the anons—as an “arrant feminist” for having labeled men snobs: “[I]t was a protest against some infringement of his power to believe in himself. Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing *the magic and delicious power* of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (my emphasis; 35). Echoing Colette’s Charlotte, Woolf’s narrator asserts that woman is bound to lying, to fictions. For, if she begins to tell the truth, “the figure in the looking-glass [the image of him that she maintains] shrinks” (36).

Woolf rapidly curtails her “contributions to the dangerous and fascinating subject of the psychology of the other sex,” and returns once
again to material things (36). She pays her bill and tells the story of her own inheritance, the news of which arrived almost at the same time as the news that she could vote. Endowed with a fixed income of £500 per year for life, Woolf’s narrator feels the bitterness and hatred that had been born of her lack of independence subside. She is free at last “to think of things in themselves” (this is a phrase she picks up in the concluding pages of *A Room*), to have an opinion about a building, a picture, a book (39). In the last pages of the second chapter, Woolf’s narrator returns home, pondering woman’s future as she goes. As she steps indoors she returns to the central question of the lectures: “but what bearing has all this upon the subject of my paper, Women and Fiction?” (40).

In chapter 3 of *A Room*, Woolf’s narrator’s resolves to narrow her inquiry and look to the historian for facts, specifically about how women lived, in England, “in the time of Elizabeth” (41). Here, she feels, lies the answer to why women did not write, for fiction depends, she asserts, on the material:

>Fiction is like a spider’s web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners. Often the attachment is scarcely perceptible; Shakespeare’s plays, for instance, seem to hang there complete by themselves. But when the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in. (41–42)

Here Woolf’s narrator introduces a second figure, Professor G. M. Trevelyan, author of a history of England (42). According to the narrator, what emerges from Trevelyan’s history, which was first published in 1926, is a picture of woman as “a very queer, composite being” (43), “an odd monster,” “a worm winged like an eagle” (44), one who in reality had little or no power, but in fiction (and memoirs) had both character and intellect. “Imaginatively she is of the highest importance,” Woolf’s narrator concludes; “practically she is completely insignificant” (43). What Woolf’s narrator wants to know, returning again to the material, and what history is unable to tell her, is how the Elizabethan woman lived: “at what age did she marry; how many children had she as a rule; what was her house like; had she a room to herself; did she do the cooking; would she be likely to have a servant?” (45).

From here Woolf’s narrator spins her story of Judith, a fictional sis-
ter to Shakespeare, her writer’s talent buried at home, bound to marry a man she has not chosen, while her brother builds a family and a career in the theatre at the “hub of the universe.” A runaway, unmarried and with child, Judith Shakespeare is pushed to suicide (47–48). Women, Woolf’s narrator concludes, could not have written in the sixteenth century, a feat that was masked by women even as late as the nineteenth century under a masculine name (and she mentions Currer Bell, George Eliot, and George Sand). And even today, she adds, “[t]he desire to be veiled still possesses them” (50). Discouragement, Woolf contends, citing Mr. Oscar Browning’s confident assertion that the most intelligent woman is no match for the intellectually weakest man, must have taken its toll on women. How, asks Woolf, could she have overcome

that very interesting and obscure masculine complex which has had so much influence upon the woman’s movement; that deep-seated desire, not so much that she shall be inferior as that he shall be superior, which plants him wherever one looks, not only in front of the arts, but barring the way to politics too, even when the risk to himself seems infinitesimal and the suppliant humble and devoted[?] (55)

In the third section of Le pur, Colette, like Woolf, broadens the scope of her inquiry. Like Woolf’s narrator, Colette’s seeks answers about women first from men: “je ne suis pas allée bien loin chercher des confidences masculines” (32) (“I never had to go out of my way to be let in on masculine secrets” [26]). The neutral eye of Woolf’s narrator perusing the shelves at the British Museum is matched by that of Colette’s narrator, whose frigidity or vice puts her interlocutor (a celebrated lover [“[un] célèbre amant” (33)] as opposed to an author of a “monumental work” about women [31]; a Don Juan rather than an Oxbridge don) at ease. Colette’s narrator is conscious of her role as listener throughout the book. Colette’s anonymous interlocutor, “Mon ami X. . . .”, like Woolf’s, is a comical caricature of sorts, here animated by rivalry and resentment rather than anger. Like Woolf’s von X., Colette’s X is hostile, in this case to mistresses who have exploited him sexually (he desires a woman who will refuse him, but when she does, so gripped is he by lust that he throws her to the floor and takes her anyway). Colette’s narrator contrasts this hostility with the lack thereof felt by women for men—a woman, she suggests, knows she is an inexhaustible store of plenty for a man—and asks herself, perhaps indicating the central thrust of this section of the work, one that matches Woolf’s narrator’s bemusement at how little men know about women: “Am I, then, going to find myself,
in the first pages of a book, declaring that men are of less use to women than women are to men? We shall see” (27).31

The setting of Colette’s narrator’s interview with X in this third section contrasts with that of Woolf’s with von X.—we move out of an academic setting into the real world. The reading room of the British Museum becomes a private dining room in a first-class restaurant—although, like the British Museum, it is “in the center of town”—a place of pleasure, of lavish eating and smoking, rather than a place of discipline and study, dark and warm like a body at odds with the head of the domed British Museum. As Woolf’s narrator interrogates von X. et al., London streets crawl with workers, housepainters, nursemaids, the woman who keeps the greengrocer’s shop (26, 39); as Colette’s narrator questions X, beyond the heavily curtained window extends “a strip of Paris, animated and silent, calling to mind a swarm of fireflies on a lake of asphalt, and I am enveloped in the facile illusion of danger lurking in the night outside, of safety within the old walls warm with secrets” (28).32

Like Woolf’s von X., Colette’s X writes. Colette’s narrator expresses surprise that X has not written a Don Juan play and reveals her plan to write her own, with a specific actor, Édouard de Max, in mind. Her companion advises against it, citing her provincial roots as a handicap. Don Juan, whom he characterizes as a tactful, diplomatic sort, who seduces and then becomes bored, has, he claims, never been properly understood (except, he implies, by himself). Colette’s decision to use this archetypal figure—symbol of cruelty, enemy of the female sex—underscores the fact that her subject, like Woolf’s, is the relationship between the sexes. A later comment (quoted below) regarding the humble origins of the Don Juan name, the relatively few pages of Molière’s play that secured its fame as at odds with its eternal quality, suggests that Colette, again like Woolf, is calling into question the stereotyping of both sexes.

Before Colette’s narrator is able to explain her approach to Don Juan, her interlocutor has grown tired and they part. A second meeting—the coming and going of Colette’s narrator recalls the meandering of Woolf’s—finds X poised to leave town. He boasts of outwitting his old lover who, out of malice, has become involved with his new one, offering her overblown stories of their sexual exploits. When Colette’s narrator inquires as to whether the new lover seeks sensuality or whether she is merely in competition with her predecessor, she watches with pleasure the expression on his face shift from “defiance” to “cunning” to “primordial hostility,” reminiscent of Woolf’s von X. doodle.
At the same time, she conjures in her head a scene from “Célimare le bienaimé,” a play by Eugène Labiche, written in 1863, where a cuckolded husband is outwitted by his wife and pitied by his servant. Following this, the narrator comments: “I changed, or at least appeared to change the subject” (34).

Colette’s narrator continues interrogating X, who plans to welcome a fellow writer from the north named Maasen (a name perhaps inspired by that of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen [OC 3: 1536]). Her subject has not changed; Don Juan continues to dominate in this chapter. Maasen, according to the narrator, is another famous womanizer. X is impressed by the figures cited discreetly by his companion, but sees this habit of Maasen’s as in no way detracting from the stature of “ce magnifique édifice humain” (42) (“that magnificent human edifice” [35]). In a man, it is suggested, conduct and art are separate. X tells Colette’s narrator: “I don’t care whether or not the edifice includes a room with mirrors and the appurtenances of a brothel.” To which Colette replies, “Naturellement” (42) (“Of course” [35]).

At this point in the book, Colette admits her collusion with X. While he speaks, she listens; she follows and goads him. In this sense, Colette, like Woolf in the second chapter of A Room, turns the tables on her male interlocutors. She encourages them to speak about themselves, and in so doing they more often than not condemn themselves.

As Woolf’s narrator moves along the shelves of the British Museum, so Colette’s moves on to de Max, her aging Don Juan, then on briefly to Francis Carco (a contemporary writer and friend of Colette) and Charles S., all of whom claim that the greatest pleasure one can gain from a woman lies in abstinence (46/39). De Max, like X, is transformed in the narrator’s imagination (47/40). Tempted by the part of Don Juan, his eyes sparkle with the colors of the water salamander; his hair, a magnificent mane, trembles as he moves his shoulders and reaches for the imaginary hilt of his sword.

From this Don Juan (“that name, of humble origin really, born of a very few pages, but eternal” never replaced by any other name in any other language [41]) Colette’s narrator turns to another Don Juan, whom she names Damien, a name reminiscent, she tells us, of his own (49/42). Damien, a possible model for Colette’s Chéri, is nonetheless rejected as such—he is too stiff, too limited, lacking “la fantaisie ployante, [... ] l’impudence et [... ] la puérilité indispensables à Chéri” (49) (“the indulgent whimsicality, the impudence and boyishness indispensable to Chéri” [42–43]). “I liked being with him, as I liked being with swift animals who are motionless when at rest. He talked little, and
I believe he was second-rate in everything except the performance of his mission on earth” (43). Colette’s narrator meets Damien in the lobby of a provincial hotel, an anonymous place—like the opium den of the first chapter—appropriate to the revelations of this lonely figure (one who in a number of ways anticipates Colette’s description of La Chevalière in the next section of Le pur). Colder and even more “fatuous” than X and de Max, Damien is tied to his métier—“une science qu’il inventait” (61) (“a science he had invented” [53]), the seduction of women. However, his conversation with Colette’s narrator suggests his disdain for and disconnection from women. His motto, “ne donne rien—n’accepte rien” (60) (“Give nothing—take nothing” [53]), at once shocks and delights Colette’s narrator. What interests Colette’s narrator about this unusual man is informed by her taste for “le vide mystérieux” (62) (“the mysterious void” [54]), the paradoxical balance of his sensual code of honor and the frisson of attraction that draws her, against her will, to him. Recalling Woolf’s von X., whose superiority rests on an uncertain foundation, that is, women’s inferiority, Colette characterizes Damien’s concern with his own power, his own ability to please as less important than its opposite, his powerlessness, his failure to please. She asks: “Can his obsession with potency ever equal, for a lover, his obsession with impotence?” (57). Like Woolf’s Professor von X., it is Damien’s lack of power that motivates him.

Colette’s Hermaphrodisme Mental and Woolf’s Androgynous Mind

In chapters 4 and 5 of A Room, Woolf turns her interrogation onto women, as does Colette in sections 4 through 7 of Le pur. Both mix the names of real women with those of fictional or unknown women. Woolf’s chapter 4 covers women’s writing of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries (Lady Winchilsea, Margaret of Newcastle [Margaret Cavendish], Dorothy Osborne, and Aphra Behn; Jane Austen, Emily and Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot) and chapter 5 the work of contemporaries, including that of fictional fiction writer Mary Carmichael. Colette’s fourth chapter introduces actress Marguerite Moreno and La Chevalière (based on Colette’s former lover Missy, La Marquise de Belbœuf); chapter 5 the British-American poet Renée Vivien; chapter 6 Amalia X and Lucienne de . . . ; and chapter 7 the Ladies of Llangollen. In each case, the writer builds a generational history of sorts (one with which to oppose the patriarchal
history constructed in the earlier chapters) of woman’s expression and creativity. Marking a separation of ways, in Woolf’s case, the focus is on the relationship of woman to a language and form that proves an inadequate receptacle for the expression of her experience; in Colette’s work the emphasis is on the relationship of woman to a body and a set of social mores at odds with her own desires.

This break in terms of focus is accompanied by a structural reversal in this second half of the text—Colette (much like A Room’s Mary Carmichael) tampers with the order of things in this section. Where Woolf ends, with a description of her conception of what she terms “the androgynous mind,” Colette begins, with an explication of what she calls “hermaphrodisme mental,” or “mental hermaphroditism.” This reversal, the resituating of this pivotal section, suggests a sequence that takes the reader from Woolf’s text to Colette’s, supporting the contention that the later text follows or responds to the earlier.

Not commonly read together, these two theories about sex and the mind are remarkable in their similarity and bring the two texts together. These discussions sum up the focus of the latter section of the book in Woolf’s case and set the stage for the same in Colette’s. Woolf precedes her exposition on mental androgyny with a series of portraits of women writers in chronological order. Progressing from the seventeenth century to the present day, Woolf constructs a platform for the launching of women’s literature, a new sentence, a woman’s sentence (76). Colette follows her discussion of mental hermaphroditism with a series of portraits of same-sex relationships, both sexual and platonic. Following no particular chronological logic (although there is a general sense that the text moves back into the past rather than forward), leaving out the dates, as she does with Lady Eleanor’s diaries, Colette explores the possibility of a same-sex relationship that involves no masquerade, no fiction.

Colette introduces her conception of mental hermaphroditism early in her fourth chapter. Whereas in the third section of Le pur Colette’s narrator plays the role of spectator, here the text takes an autobiographical turn as the narrator interrogates herself. In conversation with actress Marguerite Moreno, a fellow performer and one of Colette’s closest friends in real life, Colette’s narrator explores the existence of a virile side of certain women, one that threatens men like Damien with homosexuality. The comfortable setting of this conversation—one is tempted to imagine Woolf’s Chloe and Olivia or the Ladies of Llangollen speaking here—provides the two women with a certain liberty:
Chapter 2

We had the comfortable habit of leaving a sentence hanging midway as soon as one of us had grasped the point [. . .] No one can imagine the number of subjects, the amount of words that are left out of the conversation of two women who can talk to each other with absolute freedom. They can allow themselves the luxury of choosing exactly what to say [. . .] I burst out laughing—it does one good, when at a safe distance from the claws that have wounded us, to laugh at them, even when the old wounds are still raw and gaping. (61–62)

Moreno, who, like Colette’s narrator, physically combines the male and female, Chimène and Le Cid of Pierre Corneille’s Le Cid, in a single body (“[a]sleep, she rather resembled Dante, or a refined hidalgo, or Leonardo da Vinci’s Saint John the Baptist” [63]), argues for the superiority of a double self, part male, part female, in response to the doubts of Colette’s narrator, who, at the point in her life when the conversation took place, she tells us, craved to be completely a woman (67/71; 63/59). Moreno distinguishes between the physical androgyny of which Colette admits she is afraid and a “virilité spirituelle” (“a spiritual virility”), a mental hermaphroditism that is the domain of “highly complex” men and women alike (67/60). When Colette’s anxious narrator asks, “who will take us for women?” Moreno counters with the response: “Des femmes” (“other women”), and anticipating the shape of the rest of Le pur, she adds, “Regarde dans ta mémoire” (68) (“Think it over” [61]). Recognizing the inevitability of her own hermaphroditism and the “ambiguity,” the “flaws and privileges” it entails (67/60), Colette, closing this section with a return to work, marks the split in herself in terms of eyes and hand: “Then I resumed my post at the side of a worktable, where my woman’s eyes followed, on the pale blue bonded paper, the hard and stubby hand of a gardener writing” (64).

Woolf introduces her conception of a mental androgyny in her last chapter. Contemplating the eddy and flow of pedestrians and traffic in the London street seen from her window, Woolf’s narrator sets about wrapping things up and drawing things together. Her efforts of the previous days to see one sex as distinct from the other, she says, have tempered with the unity of mind. London appears indifferent to her dilemma (95). A sense of isolation reigns in London streets peopled by individuals: “each seems bound on some private affair of his own” (95); “all seemed separate, self-absorbed, on business of their own” (96). To this is added a momentary sense of stillness: “[n]othing came down the
street, nobody passed” (96). A single leaf falling at this moment signals to Woolf a convergence—a girl, a young man, and a taxicab (a sign of progress?)—a vision that eases Woolf’s narrator’s mind of the strain of thinking of one sex as distinct from the other (an effort which “interferes with the unity of the mind” [97]).

This leads Woolf’s narrator to consider the mind, which she calls “a very mysterious organ” marked by severances and oppositions, similar to those, she says, that exist in the body (97). The mind, she concludes, is quite flexible: it can separate itself from others or it can think with others, it can think back through things, it can be split, as is the mind of a woman who finds herself at once part of and separate from the culture in which she lives (97). But certain states of mind are more comfortable than others; certain states of mind require “nothing [. . . ] to be held back,” according to Woolf’s narrator, among them the union of male and female (97). From here, Woolf embarks on an “amateurish” plan of the soul, imagining it to be part male and part female, the female part dominating in the woman’s brain, the male in the man’s brain (98). Anticipating Colette’s discussion with Moreno, Woolf suggests that “[t]he normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating” (98). Woolf ascribes this idea to Coleridge (in so doing authorizing her theory with reference to a forefather in a way that Colette does not), who, she says, claimed that a great mind is androgynous, an assertion that she understands to mean that an androgynous mind is “resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment, that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided” (my emphasis; 98) (and she cites first Shakespeare as a possible candidate, then adds Keats, Sterne, Cowper, Lamb, Coleridge, and lastly Proust [103]). Woolf considers a heightened sex-consciousness a feature of her own age, perhaps at its root the suffrage movement (“a few women in black bonnets”), which put men unused to challenge on the defensive (99).

Woolf’s description of the androgynous mind reads as a caveat following on an analysis of how one writes as a woman: write as a woman, but don’t forget your male side, as the best writers combine the two. Colette’s description of mental hermaphroditism is a code of how to read the pages that follow: I’m not condemning those who imitate the other sex, I’m just suggesting another way to do it. In each case, they suggest that the mixing of sexes is an inevitability, a positive one.

In her fourth chapter, first reviewing the poetry of Lady Winchilsea, born in 1661, Woolf’s narrator notes the anger in her poetic voice: she bursts out “in indignation against the position of women,” her mind
“harassed and distracted with hates and grievances” (59). Little, Woolf’s narrator writes, is known about the life of Lady Winchilsea, and what there is is dismissed as gossip (61). Next Woolf’s narrator turns to Margaret of Newcastle—hers a “wild, generous, untutored intelligence.” “In both,” suggests Woolf’s narrator, “burnt the same passion for poetry and both are disfigured and deformed by the same causes” (61). She then moves on to the letters of Dorothy Osborne before turning last to Aphra Behn, with whom, she asserts, “we turn a very important corner on the road.” With Behn we leave the solitude of the country and “come to town and rub shoulders with ordinary people in the streets” (63). Behn, Woolf suggests, was the first professional woman of letters, and by her example (and those of Winchilsea and Cavendish) middle-class women began to write. They pave the way, Woolf’s narrator suggests, for Jane Austen, the Brontës, and George Eliot, anticipating her comments regarding continuing presences: “for masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people” (65).

Thus, the nineteenth-century section of the British Museum has several shelves of books by women—not the poetry of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but all novels. Woolf’s discussion turns to form. Why novels? asks Woolf’s narrator. When George Eliot, Emily Brontë, Charlotte Brontë, and Jane Austen have so little in common, what was it about the novel that appealed to all of them? Is it that the interruptions inevitable in the single common sitting room in which these women wrote made the form that required the least concentration—the novel, rather than poetry or a play—the more popular? Is it that the activity particular to that same sitting room, which meant that a woman became trained in observation of character and analysis of emotion, sharpened her eye in a way most appropriate to the novel? The question of why these women wrote novels when they had talent for other literary pursuits ceases to be of import, Woolf’s narrator suggests, when one recognizes the quality of the novels these women wrote. Here, she writes, is Austen in about 1800 “writing without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching” (68). Woolf cites (Colette, too, quotes from the works of others—specifically the Hamwood Papers and Francis Carco) a passage from Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre in which Jane muses about women and freedom but breaks off with “‘When thus alone I not unfrequently heard Grace Poole’s laugh . . .’” This “jerk,” this “indignation” means that Charlotte Brontë, according to Woolf’s narrator, “will never get her genius expressed whole and entire. Her books will be deformed and twisted. She will write in a rage
where she should write calmly” (69). Woolf’s narrator considers Brontë in her own position (as does Colette the Ladies of Llangollen)—what difference might three hundred pounds a year have made? Would it have perhaps provided a greater knowledge of the busy world, towns and regions full of life, more practical experience? Despite the poverty that plagues the lives of these women, Woolf’s narrator reminds us of the caliber of the novels they were able to produce: *Middlemarch, Villette, Emma, Wuthering Heights*. Next Woolf’s narrator considers whether the sex of the author interferes with the integrity of the novel. In Charlotte Brontë’s case, Woolf’s narrator contends that it does. Brontë’s imagination, she argues, “swerved from indignation and we feel it swerve.” The portrait of Rochester is “drawn in the dark”: “[w]e feel the influence of fear in it” (73).

Anticipating Colette’s assessment of the detrimental effects of a woman’s efforts to imitate the man she rejects, Woolf describes the difficulty a woman will face when she writes according to the “patriarchal society,” when she “alter[s] her values in deference to the opinion of others” (74). Austen and Brontë, Woolf contends, avoided this compulsion; they “ignored the perpetual admonitions of the eternal pedagogue—write this, think that” (75)—miraculously so, suggests Woolf’s narrator, at so early a date. “One must have been something of a firebrand to say to oneself, Oh, but they can’t buy literature too. Literature is open to everybody. I refuse to allow you, Beadle though you are, to turn me off the grass” (75–76).

This, however, Woolf’s narrator adds, was only half of the problem. The other consisted in the fact that women writers lacked a tradition—“there was no common sentence ready for her use” (76)—the tools provided for her were too scarce and inadequate. Further, the shape of the book “has been made by men out of their own needs for their own uses” (77). Only the novel, Woolf’s narrator suggests, is young enough and pliable enough for her use. The future of fiction, women’s fiction in particular, is a topic that Woolf’s narrator is reluctant to address. However, she does hazard one comment again relating to the physical conditions, the material things, that will affect the shape of women’s writing—“women’s books should be shorter, more concentrated, than those of men, and framed so that they do not need long hours of steady and uninterrupted work.” She suggests a somewhat scientific approach to this question, for, she says, the nerves that feed women’s brains differ from those that serve men’s brains. Thus one must discover “what treatment suits [women] [. . . ] what alternations of work and rest they need.” Without these considerations, material considerations, the question of
women and fiction has not been fully addressed. She ends this section (echoing/anticipating Colette’s claim to at least appear to change the subject) with “[h]appily my thoughts were given another turn” (78).

Chapter 5 finds Woolf’s narrator approaching the conclusion of her investigatory journey—she arrives at “the present moment” (Orlando 298): “I had come at last, in the course of this rambling, to the shelves which hold books by the living” (79). This chapter again draws Woolf and Colette together. Woolf’s description of the work of a fictional contemporary, her comments and questions regarding both style and content, appear to anticipate in a number of ways Colette’s fiction. This last set of shelves holds books by both men and women, books of all sorts—women are no longer relegated to the realm of the novel, and the novels they do write do not resemble those that they used to write (79). Woolf’s narrator takes down one in particular, the latest, “at the very end of the shelf,” “published in this very month of October” (80). Its title, Life’s Adventure, recalls Colette’s Aventures quotidiennes of 1924.39 Woolf’s narrator reads it not as Mary Carmichael’s first work but as the latest volume in a series of works written by women, a number of whom Woolf has mentioned in the course of her inquiry. What has Carmichael done, asks Woolf’s narrator, with the “characteristics and restrictions” inherited from her literary foremothers? Just as Colette is careful in imagining the Ladies of Llangollen one hundred years on in chapter 8 of Le pur, so Woolf’s narrator approaches this question with some apprehension. Her first strategy is “to get the hang of her sentences,” “to [try] a sentence or two on [her] tongue” (80). Carmichael’s writing disconcerts Woolf’s narrator; it fails to provide her with a firm handhold. However, Woolf’s narrator dutifully reads on, recognizing that despite certain irregularities and innovations (perhaps her efforts to counter stereotypes about women’s writing), Carmichael succeeds. As Woolf’s narrator describes the mechanical swerving and breaking of Carmichael’s narrative, so Woolf’s own prose swerves from one topic to another, moving from the shape of Carmichael’s work—which breaks with order and tradition—to the unconventional subject matter it treats. Before embarking on a description of the book’s contents, Woolf’s narrator jokingly asks that the doors of the lecture hall be closed and barred—making reference at this point to the presiding judge at the Well of Loneliness trial—so new and so potentially inflammatory is Carmichael’s writing. Drawing her audience (of women) closer to her in this way, Woolf anticipates the content of Carmichael’s work. She cites a first sentence: “‘Chloe liked Olivia,’” and then a second: “‘They shared a laboratory together’” (82, 83). Woolf’s narrator’s first reaction
is short and to the point. “Sometimes women do like women,” she sug-
gests, even though the history of literature would seem to suggest oth-
wise, and she cites several antipathetic relationships between women,
among them that of Cleopatra and Octavia (82). We know women,
writes Woolf’s narrator, only through the eyes of men, and the women
that men (even men like Proust) know are “peculiar,” simple beings, usu-
ally representative of one extreme or another. In order to better explain
her position, Woolf’s narrator offers a contrary scenario (one that brings
to mind the texts of Colette, such as Chéri and La vagabonde): “Suppose,
for instance,” she suggests, “that men were only represented in literature
as the lovers of women, and were never the friends of men, soldiers,
thinkers, dreamers; how few parts in the plays of Shakespeare could be
allotted to them; how literature would suffer!” (83).

The volume of questions that Woolf’s narrator asks suggests again
her apprehension, the tentative nature of her inquiry regarding the
future of women’s fiction. What if, Woolf’s narrator asks, warming to
Mary Carmichael’s work by degrees, this new woman writer were to
continue writing in this vein? If she had a room of her own and five hun-
dred pounds a year, what might this mean for women? Does
Carmichael’s work, Woolf’s narrator asks, signal a new approach to the
representation of women in literature? Has she succeeded in bringing
women out of the obscurity to which they have been relegated? Has she
succeeded in capturing “those unrecorded gestures, those unsaid or
half-said words [. . . ]” (84)? If she is to do so, Woolf’s narrator con-
tends, she will have to see double, to see differently (anticipating her
comments about androgyny):

[T]o talk of something else, looking steadily out of the window, and
thus note, not with a pencil in a notebook, but in the shortest of
shorthand, in words that are hardly syllabled yet, what happens when
Olivia [. . . ] feels the light fall on it [the window?—the referent is
unclear here], and sees coming her way a piece of strange food—
knowledge, adventure, art. And she reaches out for it, I thought,
again raising my eyes from the page, and has to devise some entirely
new combination of her resources, so highly developed for other pur-
poses, so as to absorb the new into the old without disturbing the
infinitely intricate and elaborate balance of the whole. (85)

At this point, Woolf’s narrator stops herself short, thus underscoring the
centrality to the work of her last comment (cited here) and reminding
herself—lightly ironically here—that she did not want to do what she
had recently criticized male writers for doing, that is, “praise [one’s] own sex” arbitrarily, to the exclusion of the other (85). However, although she can find nothing to verify her terms “highly developed” and “infinitely intricate” on the shelves of her library, she looks beyond the books (biographies of men) resting there and envisions woman’s role as “stimulus” and as renewer of creative power celebrating her unique relationship with words (86).

As a prelude to a final return to Mary Carmichael and the future of women and fiction, Woolf’s narrator contends that this uniqueness should be promoted. Anticipating Colette, she argues that women do not need to write like men, live like men, or look like men, “for if two sexes are quite inadequate, considering the vastness and variety of the world, how should we manage with one only? [ . . . ] we have too much likeness as it is [ . . . ].” Woolf wants Carmichael to keep on watching, contemplating, for “[t]here are so many new facts for her to observe” (88). In comments that again anticipate Colette’s work (in general), Woolf suggests that Carmichael broaden the scope of women’s writing:

She will not need to limit herself any longer to the respectable houses of the upper middle classes. She will go without kindness or condescension, but in the spirit of fellowship into those small, scented rooms where sit the courtesan, the harlot and the lady with the pug dog. There they will sit in their rough and ready-made clothes that the male writer has had perforce to clap upon their shoulders. But Mary Carmichael will have out her scissors and fit them close to every hollow and angle. (88)

Her purview will be the lives of the obscure—those who occupy all of those long streets somewhere south of the river—violet sellers, match sellers, old crones, drifting girls (89), shopgirls (90). Mary Carmichael will learn to laugh at the vanities of the other sex, and her humor, suggests Woolf’s narrator, will educate.

Again here, Woolf’s narrator checks herself; she looks down at the page of Mary Carmichael’s book rather than beyond it. Taking us back to the beginning of this chapter, Woolf’s writing again mimicking that of Carmichael, Woolf repeats her description of the disruptive nature of Carmichael’s writing—things are not to be found in their usual place (91). While Carmichael perhaps lacks the genius of some of her foremothers, according to Woolf’s narrator, she enjoys a liberty unavailable to those same women writers. Again, Woolf comes remarkably close to a description of Colette’s writing:
She had a sensibility that was very wide, eager and free. It responded to an almost imperceptible touch on it. It feasted like a plant newly stood in the air on every sight and sound that came its way. It ranged, too, very subtly and curiously, among almost unknown or unrecorded things; it lighted on small things and showed that perhaps they were not small after all. It brought buried things to light and made one wonder what need there had been to bury them [. . . ]. [S]he wrote as a woman, but as a woman who has forgotten that she is a woman, so that her pages were full of that curious sexual quality which comes only when sex is unconscious of itself. (92–93)

Woolf tests Mary Carmichael with “a situation,” a challenge to which she rises quite admirably. Woolf’s narrator suggests returning to material things, considering she writes “her first novel in a bed-sitting-room, without enough of those desirable things, time, money and idleness” (94).

In the remainder of chapter 4 and in chapters 5, 6, and 7 of Le pur, Colette offers a number of portraits of friendship among women. In her fourth section, Colette continues her interrogation of her masculine and feminine sides—her androgyny or hermaphroditism, that which takes her over the line designating where official sex ends and clandestine sex begins—with a brief visit to the studio of the painter Boldini (Giovanni Boldini, 1842–1931). Offended by what Colette later recognizes as his perceptive casting of her as confused about her sexual status, she leaves him behind (adjusting the knot of her mannish necktie indignantly as she goes) to rejoin “a strange company of women who led a marginal and timorous life, sustained by an out of date form of snobbishness” (63).

What follows is a description of an older set of lesbians, wealthy and titled for the most part, who frequented the margins of good society, discreetly veiling their male attire with a second mask, a nondescript cloak. Like Lady Winchilsea, Margaret of Newcastle, and even George Sand, George Eliot, and Currer Bell, these women veil their transgressions. Among these women, Colette focuses on one she names La Chevalière, a character based on a real-life figure, her lover, the Marquise de Morny. These are “mannish women” who imitate men—backgammon, bezique (75/68), darkened rooms, gambling and indolence (77/69), monocles, carnations in buttonholes; they take God’s name in vain, discuss horses competently (80/72), and smoke cigars (83/75). Many have protégées—one among them refers to hers as her spouse. Many, too, have a taste for “below-stairs accomplices and comrades-in-livery”
(bringing to mind young Stephen’s first love, Collins, in Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*) (70). Salvaging La Chevalière from among them, Colette “[salue] le déclin de ces femmes” (81) (“hail[s] the decline of these women” [73]). She portrays the lot of “a person of uncertain or dissimulated sex” as a poor one: “Anxious and veiled, never exposed to the light of day, the androgynous creature wanders, wonders and implores in a whisper . . .” (76). These women, like Winchelsea, Margaret of Newcastle, and even Behn, are “inquiètes, traquées par leur propre solitude” (86) (“uneasy women, haunted by their own solitude” [77]).

In her fifth section, Colette offers a personal portrait of contemporary poet Renée Vivien (Pauline Tarn), about whom Colette also writes in her *Aventures quotidiennes* (*Œuvres* 3: 136–38). In a gesture characteristic of Colette, sparse reference is made to Vivien’s work, with attention focused rather on the life of the poet. Here Colette does as Woolf suggests: breaking with convention, she enters into Vivien’s life, into her apartment, and cuts the cloth closely about her shoulders (much of her description of Vivien is physical; the descriptions of Vivien’s occupation of space are central to Colette’s portrait); she draws Vivien out of the chaos of her setting. Following on from the pessimistic description of the doomed life of the androgyne, Colette offers a dystopic vision of Vivien’s existence. The poet is addicted to alcohol, suffers from anorexia, and is dominated by an unseen (and perhaps nonexistent) lover. The claustrophobia of Vivien’s apartment, half lit, airless, her windows nailed shut (93), her universe “padlocked” [“son univers cadenassé” (96)], mirrors the oppressive atmosphere of Vivien’s existence and the narrowness of her relationships (purely sexual, according to Colette).

Colette’s choice of imagery to describe Vivien again brings to mind Woolf’s descriptions of Mary Carmichael’s writing. Vivien gives things away, necklaces and bracelets, like a tree shedding its leaves (“elle semblait s’effeuiller” [91]); the laughing countenance of Vivien saddens Colette, as does that of blind children who laugh and play with agility without the security of light; this tall young girl empties her glass with the nonchalance of a bridesmaid at a country wedding (91).

Colette opens chapter 6 with a description of a rakish lesbian, Lucienne de . . . (an assumed name, Colette tells us), as recounted to her by an old actress acquaintance, Amalia X. (The distancing of Lucienne de . . ., her story mediated by Amalia X, the teller of the story, pushes her back in time.) Lucienne’s photograph, Colette’s only firsthand knowledge of this woman, shows her in a man’s suit, its traces of feminine taste (lapels too wide, the wrong shoes) alone betraying the incongruous
body contained within it—an incongruity matched by the false signature on the photograph. “One feels that a feminine imagination, imprisoned beneath the bared forehead of a spurious man, regrets having been unable to let itself go in jabots, ribbons, silky fabrics” (100). Why did a woman, asks Colette, whose mission was to rival and defraud men, try so hard to look like one? Colette’s narrator’s subsequent turn in this section to the character with whom she began the section, Amalia X, who is now poised over a set of tarot cards (reading her own future), suggests a step forward or a step closer to the narrator. Amalia, while she covets the possibility of the illusion that she was once “the equal of a young man,” denies that she ever had had to or had wanted to stop being a woman. Anticipating the Ladies, she asserts that “when a woman remains a woman, she is a complete human being” (102). Having finished her questioning of Amalia, the narrator writes, “j’allais plus loin . . .” (“I pursued the subject further” [108]).

Colette’s celebration of the calm and consistency of the union of the Ladies of Llangollen parallels Woolf’s celebration in A Room of the work of Mary Carmichael, of a woman writing as herself. The utopic relationship of Lady Eleanor and Lady Sarah contrasts with the dystopic atmosphere of Renée Vivien’s life, mirrored in her oppressive prison of a dining room, the scents and tastes and wealth of which nauseate Colette’s narrator, and the destructive disjunction of Lucienne’s feminine body and masculine mask. Colette’s narrator celebrates the bond that is possible between two beings, the sameness of whose bodies defies separation—“the pudicity that separates two lovers during the hours of repose, of ablutions, of illness never insinuates itself between two twin bodies that have similar afflictions, are subject to the same cares, the same predictable periods of chastity . . .” (111). She contrasts the union of the Ladies with the conquests of Renée Vivien, whose distraught cynicism denied her the possibility of a bond based on anything other than sensuality (here providing a parallel for Woolf’s contrasting of those women who wrote with anger and those without). Colette claims that what ties two women together is kinship (“parenté”), similarity (“similitude,” “l’étroite ressemblance”), not passion. A woman, she writes, “se complaît dans la certitude de caresser un corps dont elle connaît les secrets” (121) (“finds pleasure in caressing a body whose secrets she knows” [111])—a recognition of herself as herself. Why, Colette suggests readers will ask, is the feverish pleasure of the senses absent from a chapter “où passent et repassent, liées par paires, des femmes” (122) (“where women pass and pass again, two by two” [112–13]). Sapphic libertinage, she replies, is the only unacceptable
The sensuality among women is an unresolved and an undemanding one. This, she claims, is what makes the half-century-long alliance of the Ladies possible.

"Think of things in themselves"

In the concluding chapter of A Room (anticipating an autobiographical turn in Colette’s Le pur in section 8) Woolf dispenses with her narrator in order to end “in my own person” (105). This turn emphasizes, while seeming to observe it, the arbitrary nature of the line dividing fiction and reality. Woolf anticipates objections to her approach to the question at hand. She has not weighed the comparative merits of male and female writing, her detractors will say, a project that she dismisses as of no value: “[p]raise and blame alike mean nothing” (106). She has placed too much emphasis on material things. This second objection she counters with a quote from Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, editor of the Oxford Book of English Verse (1900), who, reviewing the opportunities available to “great poetical names” like Coleridge, Wordsworth, and so on, concludes that “the poor poet has not in these days, nor has had for two hundred years, a dog’s chance” (107). “Intellectual freedom,” Woolf sums up, “depends upon material things,” hence her “stress on money and a room of one’s own” (108). A third question foreseen by Woolf concerns the importance of a woman’s voice in the field of literature. Why, if it is so much trouble, do women need to write? Woolf’s motives for encouraging them to do so, she suggests, “are partly selfish” (108). She wants variety in what she reads, and she encourages her audience to write all kinds of different things, “books of travel and adventure,” “research and scholarship,” “history and biography,” “criticism and philosophy and science,” not just fiction (109).

While contemplating her motives for encouraging her audience to write, Woolf turns to a discussion of reality, which she defines as “very erratic, very undependable.” It is the business of the writer, she asserts, to find this reality “and collect it and communicate it to the rest of us.” Great books, she suggests, in doing this cause one to “[see] more intensely afterwards”; they “perform a curious couching operation on the senses” (110). If women can earn money, have a room of their own, live in the presence of this reality, whether they impart it or not, Woolf will be satisfied.

Woolf ends with a modest proposal. Don’t dream about influencing others, she says; rather, “[t]hink of things in themselves” (111). She
repeats her assertion that women are hard on women, and she tries to find something disagreeable to end on—but nothing will come. Instead she says: “I often like women. I like their unconventionality. I like their subtlety. I like their anonymity. I like—but I must not run on in this way” (111). Her last “I like” is broken by a dash, denoting the silence in her work around questions of homosexuality, suggested here by her second covert reference to the Well of Loneliness trial (to Bodkin). Her closing words are challenging: “you are, in my opinion, disgracefully ignorant [. . . ] What is your excuse?” (112). Yes, she admits ironically, child rearing has taken up some of women’s time, but the right to vote, to education, to own property are all theirs now. Use them!

In order to reinforce this last point, in her closing paragraph Woolf reverts appropriately to the realm of fiction, to the story of Shakespeare’s sister. She repeats the unfortunate circumstances of Judith’s early demise, her burial at the crossroads “where the omnibuses now stop, opposite the Elephant and Castle,” this location emphasizing her centrality and her proximity (113). However, Woolf contends, this poet lives on; she is a “continuing presence” in the speaker and the audience, the narrator and the reader. And if Woolf’s audience has the courage to stand up, or rather sit down, and write, Judith Shakespeare, according to Woolf, “will put on the body which she has so often laid down” (114).

In an Orlandoesque moment at the beginning of her penultimate chapter, Colette, like Woolf in closing, moves speedily to the present day, envisioning the Ladies of Llangollen one hundred years on. Like Woolf, Colette is tentative in her approach to the question of the future of women and of women in fiction. Can we possibly, she asks, echoing Woolf, imagine “sans appréhension” (“without apprehension”) “deux Dames de Llangollen de 1930?” (my emphasis; 142) (“two ladies of Llangollen in this year of 1930?” [130]). Colette builds a picture: short hair, a car, dungarees, cigarettes, a liquor bar in their apartment. Would Sarah, she goes on to ask, still know how to remain silent? Perhaps, she says, “les mots croisés aidant” (142) (“with the aid of crosswords” [131]). Eleanor Butler curses as she jacks up her car and has her breasts amputated. She no longer greets the village blacksmith, but she chats informally with the garage man, armed, thanks to Marcel Proust, with scandalous appetites and habits and a vocabulary to match (142–43). But Proust is wrong to characterize her in this way, contends Colette, in so doing setting herself up to write in opposition to him. While, like Woolf, she considers Proust a great writer, again like Woolf, she questions his knowledge of women. Colette recognizes Proust’s unsurpassed skills as a guide through Sodom, but asserts that Gomorrah, as Proust
envisions it, peopled by “insondables et vicieuses jeunes filles” (143) (“inscrutable and depraved young girls” [131]), does not exist. She characterizes Proust’s vision of the origin of female homosexuality—puberty, boarding school, solitude, prisons, aberrations, snobishness—as a foundation too weak to support something so powerful (“un vice nombreux, bien assis, et sa solidarité indispensable” [143]).

In this chapter, Colette turns, as does Woolf, to the material circumstances of writing. She describes her days as a ghostwriter in Willy’s atelier accompanied by her mostly homosexual colleagues. Whereas Woolf looks to her female audience, Colette looks to her male colleagues: “I was faithful to their concept of me as a nice piece of furniture and I listened to them as if I were an expert” (138).\(^48\) Colette finds reality, collects it and communicates it, as Woolf suggests in *A Room* (110). Her descriptions of her homosexual colleagues (many of them English; see note 8) are sympathetic and laudatory—hers a privilege to witness and participate in this scene she names “pure” (161/148), usually inaccessible to the female sex. Her stories depict a utopian society (one that she dates as turn-of-the-century)—an interesting contrast to her earlier description of Sapphic women. Colette’s gay men (contrary, she suggests, to popular belief) are dignified, well educated: “A kind of austerity overlaid it which I can compare to no other, for it held nothing of parade or precaution, nor did it spring from the morbid fear that galvanizes more often than it checks so many among those hounded by society” (147).\(^49\) These men—who Colette affectionately calls “monsters”—shielded her, shared in her fear and her grief, and demonstrated with their paradoxical normalcy the abnormality of the situation in which Colette found herself, we presume, with respect to her first husband, Willy.

Colette ends this penultimate section with a vignette describing an old friend, a Spaniard called Pepe, who sought out young workmen on the Paris streets. Pepe’s poetic imagination, suggests Colette, could not be matched: “No one has ever talked to me as he did of the color blue or of golden hair curling like shavings around a reddened ear” (150).\(^50\) Pepe’s is a story of disappointment in masquerade. Having been prompted by a beautiful young man to follow him home—the delicious fear that Pepe experiences (he may kill me, but what better way to die is there?) is shattered when the young man emerges in a woman’s chemise, pompom roses in his hair—an image that pursues Pepe to his death at his own hand.

In the final section of *Le pur*, Colette continues (providing a bridge, or so it appears) on the subject of her homosexual coworkers and her
own literary apprenticeship. So adept are they (and here she is unclear who) at the art of dissimulating (recalling the focus of her work introduced via Charlotte in the first two sections of the book), she suggests, that “tout semble imparfait” (168) (“everything else seems imperfect” [155]). Her first story here is about the revenge a homosexual man takes on a gossiping woman who has revealed his relationship: he finds a female lover for her husband. Colette confesses what she learned from these friends—how to dissimulate and how to recognize dissimulation in others. Insight, Colette claims, gave her an edge—the ability to do harm, to take from those who trusted her. Softened by contact with children and animals, Colette says she is nevertheless still “de taille à gaspiller, comme à piller” (172–73) (“strong enough to be lavish with my gifts as well as to plunder the riches of others” [160]). Her pleasure is to give and take, play the robber one minute and the spendthrift the next, a pleasure only possible when in combat with an equal. Among these is D . . . , a Polynesian painter engraver (his name recalls Woolf’s introduction of Mr. A and Mr. B in her last chapter). D . . . , like Colette, and others of their kind, keep a distance from each other, never daring to admit that they need one another. Colette recounts an elaborate (fabricated?) apology made by D . . . , who had failed to honor a dinner engagement. Her narrative then takes a sudden turn. Bored by the likes of D . . . and D . . . ’s pretense, Colette waxes nostalgic about love: “Arrange for me, in the last third of my life, a clear space where I can put my favorite crudity, love. Merely to have it before me and to breathe it in, merely to touch it with hand or tooth, it keeps me young” (164). She interrogates her own relationship with love and, nestled at love’s side “comme un œillet noir” (177) (“like a dark carnation” [164]), jealousy. She recalls her grandmother’s lifelong suspicion of love, one from which she, too, suffered as a young woman. She suggests the creative breadth of the mind of a woman spurned, the sharpening of her faculties that results from a challenger in love. Jealousy, she writes, is “a kind of gymnast’s purgatory, where the senses are trained, one by one” (166); “[c]hecked, then released briefly like an elastic band, it almost has the virtue of an exercising apparatus” (167). She also recalls, however, the destructive nature of such a passion, which when acted upon provides little joy. In a comical moment, Colette thinks back to her own feud with a rival, whom she calls Madame X. Neglecting her side of the bargain, failing to respond in kind to the curses aimed in her direction, busy with writing, Colette was brought down by her rival: she fell in a ditch, caught bronchitis, lost part of a manuscript, and was cheated by a cab driver. This is an antagonism that, Colette claims, did not last in any real form:
“I have ceased,” she writes, “to exchange, shall never more exchange because of a man and through a man that menacing thought” (171). Colette’s narrator ends Le pur with a discussion of the feasibility, or lack thereof, in her opinion, of sexual permissiveness and of a relationship involving three people. Laughable, she suggests, is the belief that sexual permissiveness can work. It is passionless, “lukewarm”; “on respire un air fade de fausse famille” (187) (“[it] reminds one of the stuffiness of a closed room” [173])—the spatial figure of the translation here taking us back to A Room. The ménage à trois, sanctified in literature as “harmonie ternaire de l’amour” (187) (“‘the eternal triangle’” [173]), she adds, is equally unworkable—and often the worst hit is the man who orchestrates it, a result of the fact, she suggests, that “women pair off,” frequently in secret (174). They form a union that is impenetrable. Again using an example, Colette describes the reaction of one woman at the death of her rival, her lover’s lover. In contrast, suggests Colette, to the Ladies of Llangollen, whose “voies célestes” (“celestial ways”) were not known to these other women, these two women—perhaps like Woolf and Colette—kept their union secret, a pure union, which the women come to conceive of as disconnected from the man via whom their bond was formed. The characterization of this relationship as “pur” (188) (“pure” [174]) provides closure, although not finality, to Colette’s work. For Colette, the word has no boundaries: she takes the word apart, the plaintive “u,” “l’r de glace limpide” (188–89) (“the icy limpidity of the ‘r’” [174–75]). While the sound provides no “intelligible meaning” to her (it is without limits), she longs to hear it again and to drink it down deeply, revel in its expansiveness and possibility. In this way, Colette’s conclusion echoes Woolf’s call to women to venture out and to work together.

Conclusion: Ces Deux Opiniâtres Amies

Reading A Room and Le pur together suggests a reciprocity or dialogue between the two writers. Colette’s Le pur functions as a sequel to A Room, one that Woolf projected but never undertook. Mimicking its treatment of the story of the Ladies of Llangollen, Le pur liberates and builds on A Room, as it puts into practice that which is prescribed by the earlier text. However, while Le pur follows Woolf’s A Room, it also runs counter to it; its contents run up against A Room, away from it. Le pur and A Room thus sit side by side like two “opinionated friends” in conversation, like Lady Sarah and Lady Eleanor, Chloe and Olivia, Colette
and Charlotte, Mary Beton and Mary Seton, Moreno and Colette, the female students of Woolf’s audience, Woolf and Colette.

The deconstruction of the word “pur” in Colette’s last paragraph takes us back to the opening page of Woolf’s *A Room* and her (tongue-in-cheek) suggestion that it is the “pure oil of truth” she seeks. Colette’s sounding out of the letters that make up “pur” remind us of Woolf’s distillation of her advice to her audience to “think of things in themselves.” Each closing suggests an openness to the other. In this way, Woolf’s text provides a key to Colette’s and Colette’s to Woolf’s, one that I explore further, in terms of spatial form and women’s writing, in the next chapter.