



La Vagabonde assise¹ – space, place and the meaning of home in Colette and other women writers

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journals.sagepub.com/home/frc**Diana Holmes**

University of Leeds, UK

Résumé

L'une des dimensions précieuses de l'oeuvre critique de Nick Hewitt, c'est sa mise en valeur de l'importance de différents lieux et espaces dans l'histoire et la culture de la France, comme dans la vie de chacun. Lieux et espaces jouent un rôle important dans les écrits de Colette, non seulement son évocation de la maison natale à Saint-Sauveur, devenue célèbre, mais aussi celle d'autres maisons, du paysage bourguignon, de Bretagne, de Provence et bien sûr de Paris. Son écriture traverse différents lieux et demeures mais l'un des thèmes récurrents c'est le foyer comme lieu crucial dans la vie affective de tout être humain. Nick a toujours mis en avant aussi la relation entre les auteurs canoniques et leurs contemporains dits "mineurs", tout comme il a insisté sur le rapport réciproque entre moment socio-politique et production culturelle. Dans cet article, le thème vital du foyer est examiné non seulement dans l'oeuvre de Colette mais aussi dans celle de ses contemporaines moins connues de la période entre les deux guerres. Car l'espace domestique - le foyer - a des significations pratiques et affectives particulières pour les femmes.

Mots-clés

Colette, foyer, Germaine Beaumont, L'entre-deux-guerres, Irène Némirovsky, Suzanne Normand, Écriture de femmes

Abstract

Nick Hewitt wrote wonderfully well about the significance of different places in French history and culture, and in our lives. Colette was a chronicler of places, from the famous childhood house and garden in Burgundy, to Brittany, Provence and of course Paris. But as her writing moves across regions and houses, home recurs as a crucial place in the emotional landscape of a human life. Nick was also always attentive to the relationship between canonical and 'minor' authors, and to the interplay between socio-political moment and cultural production. In this article home is

Corresponding author:

Diana Holmes, University of Leeds, 151 Compton Road, Wolverhampton WV3 9JT, Leeds, UK.

Email: d.holmes@leeds.ac.uk

examined as a vital and recurring theme not only in the work of Colette but also in that of her lesser-known female contemporaries – for home as a place has particular practical and emotional meanings for women.

Keywords

Colette, home, Germaine Beaumont, inter-war, Irène Némirovsky, Suzanne Normand, women's writing

Nick Hewitt wrote wonderfully well about the significance of different places in French history and culture, and in our lives. Colette was a chronicler of places, from the famous childhood house and garden in Burgundy, to Brittany, Provence and of course Paris. But as her writing moves across regions and houses, home recurs as a crucial place in the emotional landscape of a human life. Home is also a vital and recurring theme in the work of her female contemporaries, for home as a place has particular practical and emotional meanings for women.

In her essay *Trois...Six...Neuf*, published in 1944, Colette reviews the many dwellings in which she made her home between her first arrival in Paris as a young bride in 1893, and her final move in 1938 to the first-floor apartment overlooking the Palais-Royal, where she would live and write until her death in 1954. A typically Colettian paradox appears in this affectionate, often humorous inventory of past residences. Though Colette presents her numerous moves as the consequence of a naturally 'migratory' nature ('les migrants de mon espèce' [2001: 718]), she also defines herself as inclined to a settled existence: she belongs to the category of the 'sédentaires par goût' with their tendency to develop 'un fort attachement au lieu qu'ils habitent' (2001: 699). This tension between on the one hand the urge to *vagabondage*, or the refusal of fixed domestic space in the name of freedom, and on the other a deep attachment to beloved dwellings, runs through Colette's whole *oeuvre*. It is a contradiction that is fundamentally human, home being at once the site of security and belonging, and that of confinement and the curtailment of adventure. What I want to argue here is that this dual characterisation of home has specifically gendered meanings for women and shapes the work of many female French writers of the inter-war era, finding its most acute and resonant expression in novels by Colette.

Colette is generally discussed in isolation as a singular *genie féminin* (Kristeva, 2002), and it is certainly true that her writing is unique and of exceptional brilliance. However, as Nick Hewitt's cultural history approach to literary study consistently demonstrated, all artists are shaped by – as well as contributing to – the socio-cultural context of the day, and Colette was no exception. As Margaret Davies put it, she 'participated discreetly in the spirit of the time' (Davies, 1961: 40, adapted). Her work often shares themes and narrative strategies with that of her contemporaries, and particularly the women authors who wrote and published alongside her – and the recurrence of certain themes and motifs across the literature written and read in a given era suggests their significance in the lives of both writers and readers. My intention here is first to review the ways in which home has been conceptualised by theorists of space and place, then to consider how the concept of 'home' might have specific significance for women. This will lead into an analysis of the treatment of this theme in some women writers of the 1920s and 30s, concluding with Colette's singular yet comparable representation of the relationship between women and home.

Space, place and home

The human desire for home and belonging, and the contradictory pull of the open world beyond its walls, have been theorised by many writers. In *La Poétique de l'espace*, Bachelard describes home

as an 'espace(s) de possession, (...) défendu contre des forces adverses, espace aimé' (1958: 17). For de Certeau too, in *L'Invention du quotidien*, home represents a place of security, material, psychological and social, in which 'le corps dispose d'un abri clos' (1980: 207). Home, he affirms, is 'un lieu protégé d'où la présence du corps social sur le corps individuel est écartée' (207), a space that allows us to affirm individual identity by projecting our sense of self into spatial surroundings, creating through a 'jeu des exclusions et des préférences' a 'portrait ressemblant' (206) of the occupant. However, de Certeau reminds us, home cannot be enough for a fully human life since 'la vie est aussi mobilité, impatience de changement, relation à un pluriel d'autrui' (209). The 'abri clos' represents a welcome haven, but enclosure can also mean confinement. The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan distinguishes between place, the private areas that we make our own, and space, that wider part of the world that we have not domesticated through practice: 'place is security, space is freedom: we are attached to one and yearn for the other' (1977: 3). 'From the security and stability of place' he continues, 'we are aware of the openness, freedom and threat of space, and vice versa' (6). Home is experienced then as both security and restriction, public space as both the zone of a liberating freedom, and as threateningly foreign.

This dual relationship to home is assumed by all three theorists – and does indeed seem – to be universally human, however culturally varied in form. Yet in patriarchal (that is to say, in most) societies, the experience of space and place is surely also gendered. Home as domestic space is closely associated with the feminine and the maternal: excluded to varying degrees from the public sphere, women are assigned the management of the private domain of home, and the reproductive and caring activities that belong there, but as daughters, wives and mothers they remain subject to the legal and financial authority of men. In France, up until 1965 the husband was legally head of the household and solely in charge of the couple's joint property, as decreed by the 1804 Napoleonic Code: home was largely the wife's practical responsibility, but its proprietor was the husband. As a child, a girl might associate home primarily with the mother, but for the vast majority marriage was the rite of passage into adult womanhood, and once married a woman found herself living in a dwelling that was legally the property of her husband and in which his word was quite literally law. The home was characterised as a woman's main site of activity and possible fulfilment, but it was also her place of confinement. Yet to inhabit the public realm as a single woman, or to create a home for oneself outside marriage remained difficult, both materially and socially.

The tension between the desire for home as a haven of belonging, and the urge to escape the domestic enclosure of the home and explore the world beyond, plays out repeatedly in women's writing of the early twentieth century, and forms a central thread in Colette's work. Already in her early novels Colette had made the dual relationship to home part of the vital texture of her writing. Claudine, her first heroine, spends a happy girlhood in the quasi-maternal house, garden, village and woods of Montigny. Though motherless, Claudine grows up in a place suffused with the enabling warmth of the good mother: her 'chers bois' ('Dieu, que je les aime!') [Colette, 1984: 8] have afforded her 'dix années de vagabondages éperdus, de conquêtes et de découvertes' (9). Though in *Claudine à Paris* and *Claudine en ménage* she gladly moves on to explore adult life in the city, marrying the sophisticated Renaud and building a new, adventurous life, she retains a nostalgic yearning for the place that she feels belongs to her in a way that Renaud's elegant apartment certainly does not: 'J'habite ici chez un monsieur, un monsieur que j'aime, soit, mais j'habite chez un monsieur' (1984: 420). In the final novel of the Claudine sequence, *La Retraite sentimentale* (1906), the widowed Claudine finally returns to Montigny to live alone in a house and garden that now fully belong to her. Colette has her heroine retreat (as the title suggests) into the 'abri clos' of a beloved home. But the final descriptions of house and garden inflect the sense of enclosure with images of permeability to the world beyond.² The garden walls are crumbling: 'mur que les racines puissantes du noyer ont crevé d'abord, puis jeté bas' (942), and the doors of the house remain literally and figuratively open: 'la porte ouverte pour que la nuit puisse entrer' (955).

Renée Néré, heroine of *La Vagabonde* (1910), will choose the open door. The plot hinges on Renée's conflicting desires for, on the one hand, freedom, adventure and independence and, on the other, the loving security that marriage to her wealthy and adoring lover Max would provide. Unlike Claudine, Renée chooses *vagabondage*, aware however that she will suffer moments of regret for the warmth of Max's arms and the sense they provide of being protected from the outside world: 'Vagabonde, et libre, je souhaiterai parfois l'ombre de tes murs...' (1984: 1232).

In the abundant women's fiction of those years – the novels of, among many others, Daniel Lesueur, Marcelle Tinayre, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, as well as Colette – the conflicted relationship between home as haven of belonging and domestic space as the materialisation of captivity is a recurring theme. But it is in women's writing of the 1920s and 30s that this tension is addressed with recurrent intensity, finding its most compelling and hopeful resolution in some of Colette's inter-war novels. Whilst the period from the 1880s to 1914 had already seen significant changes in French women's situation,³ the 1914–18 war both accelerated some aspects of their emancipation and intensified the imperative to accept domestic enclosure.

Women writers and home in the inter-war years

The social liberation provided for French women by men's departure to the 1914–18 war has been much exaggerated, but it is true that the absence of men opened up a certain number of professions and repositioned many women, at least temporarily, as heads of families. Post-war, the desire to re-establish a safely familiar social order led to a determined campaign to return women to the home that included large-scale dismissals from work, harsh pro-natalist legislation, propaganda in the media and the promotion of the home as the principal site of women's duty and happiness, with a renewed emphasis on training for girls in the domestic arts and the establishment of an annual, highly publicised celebration of home-making, the *Salon des Arts Ménagers*, in 1923.⁴ If the comfort and security of a *foyer* remained an important part of life for most women (as for most men), the association of the home with confinement and limitation of possibilities remained acute and figured in much fiction written by women and addressed mainly to women readers.

Despite the publishing boom that followed World War I in France, and the presence of many women among the period's authors, very few female writers of the 1920s and 30s have achieved canonical status or even remained in print. As Jennifer Milligan's seminal study *The Forgotten Generation: French Women Writers of the Inter-War Period* (Milligan, 1996) shows, though a considerable number of women were published and widely read,⁵ literary history has largely retained only Colette as a significant woman author of this era. Milligan's study opens up a wider picture of women's inter-war writing which has been pursued by other feminist critics,⁶ Nelly Sanchez for example asserting that the 'apparente stagnation' of those years 'masque cependant une évolution importante de la littérature féminine' (2011). One aspect of that evolution lies in the recurrent and resonant theme of home, represented both as women's prescribed and limiting domain, and as a desired and fulfilling destination. The theme carries through from women-authored writing of the pre-war years but is re-shaped by changes in women's situation. On the one hand protagonists enjoy greater spatial and social freedom, for despite the fierce backlash of the post-war years the war had accelerated women's emancipation in everyday ways. The quest to combine security with what de Certeau terms 'mobilité, relation avec un pluriel d'autrui' (1980: 209) takes new forms, often involving literal, solitary journeys across the country in search of new beginnings, and less circumscribed extra-familial relationships with both men and other women. Conversely, the critical portrayal of the marital home as a place of constraint and enclosure is sharpened by the post-war reversal of what had seemed to be an inexorable march towards greater equality. Women novelists of these years offer vivid portrayals of the home/freedom dichotomy,

some of which emphasise the impossibility of its resolution, while others propose at least figurative images of home as a place of safety that opens onto a world beyond.

In Suzanne Normand's⁷ *Cinq femmes sur une galère* (Normand, 1927), a group of single, divorced or war-widowed young women form a 'camp-volant de femmes émancipées' (9), living independently in Paris, scraping a living through editing, translating, journalism, teaching or secretarial work. Three of the group share a cheap, shabbily furnished flat while the others live in dingy hotel rooms but gravitate regularly towards the sororal space of the shared apartment. They are proud of their self-reliance, their repudiation of domestic living, their invention of a new mode of female being 'sans devoirs, sans obligations, sans règles' (229). Visits to the home of a happily married friend elicit only scorn for 'l'humeur ménagère et la plate quiétude qui conviennent à une femme solidement fixée dans l'existence' (56). But whilst the affectionate solidarity of the friendship group lends a semblance of homeliness to their threadbare living arrangements, each of them is gradually worn down by the sheer difficulty of living as a single woman in 1920s France. Their work is underpaid – most of them earn half the salary of their male colleagues – and precarious: Reine, the teacher, is thrown out of work once the male teachers return from war, while Maguy, who has performed the work of a financial manager whilst being paid as a secretary, loses her job when her love affair with her boss comes to an end. They live in insecure poverty and are sexually and emotionally exploited by married men who take their independence for availability and always, in the end, return to the domestic comfort of their wives. Finally, with regret and a sense of shame, the women vacate 'le cher appartement', leaving 'tant de notre coeur accroché à ses murs, que ce déménagement ressemble à une mise en bière' (232), and resign themselves to the traditional female life they have fought to avoid. Régine represents the collective defeat when she accepts the proposal of a much older, affluent man: 'enlaidie et triste, j'ai vu s'ouvrir sa maison, ses bras' (229), she acknowledges, significantly placing the house before the man. A novel of two halves, *Cinq femmes* begins by celebrating the relative social freedoms of the flapper generation, but ends by acknowledging the overwhelming pressure, both material and emotional, to return to the home.

The same author's *Marie-Aimée* (Normand, 1929) also addresses the difficulty of forging a fulfilling life outside the normative domestic model. The eponymous heroine leaves the Parisian apartment shared miserably with her violent, unfaithful husband, finally jolted into action after years of his abuse when he threatens to destroy such protection as the conjugal home afforded by moving his latest mistress in to share it. Marie-Aimée creates for herself a provisional space of shelter and belonging in a boarding house, in the provincial town where she finds work as a milliner. For the first time she has a home that is fully her own: the large, if shabbily furnished, room is 'un appartement à soi' that she takes pleasure in organising and decorating (98); as for Normand's 'cinq femmes', initially this independent dwelling 'a pour Marie-Aimée un visage, pas encore celui de la solitude: celui de la liberté' (76). The loneliness of a solitary life, however, always threatens, and Normand's heroine persistently confuses sensual desire with love, taking a series of abusive male lovers, undergoing a realistically depicted illegal abortion, and attempting suicide after the final betrayal puts an end to her dream of re-creating a shared home with a loving man. It is after this, at the novel's dénouement, that Marie-Aimée returns to her childhood home in the Haute-Savoie that has haunted her memory throughout the story. She returns though not to the parental home of her childhood, but to that of Tante Cécile, an eccentric, uneducated but quietly wise woman whose garden with its splendid abundance of colour and perfume, its falling-down fences and openness to the world around, recalls Claudine's Montigny garden at the close of *La Retraite sentimentale*.

Le jardin de la Tante Cécile, à lui seul, dispensait en couleurs, en odeurs, en espace, tous les enchantements. Nulle part il n'y avait plus de désordre et d'éclat, un désordre enivré, un éclat qui, à la lettre, explosait. (254)

In the 'enclos étroit' (254) of Tante-Cécile's home, Marie-Aimée is safe and cared for, out of reach of the men to whom she has been drawn by desire but who have harmed her. But it is the garden's spaciousness and openness to the world beyond, its fences concealed and bent by the mass of flowers ('les fleurs les dissimulaient, les faisaient ployer, les anéantissaient, sous leur masse tendre' (254)) that bestows what Marie-Aimée perceives as its 'royauté'. The novel ends not, like *Cinq femmes*, on a note of defeated resignation, nor perhaps with any practical solution, but with the image of a safe, nurturing domestic space that offers access to the world outside its walls. When Marie-Aimée's kind female friend Claude tries to persuade her that her best destiny would be marriage with a patient, faithful suitor, she adamantly refuses. The novel closes with her reply: 'Non, non, pas ça, madame Claude. Pas ça, vous comprenez?' (259). The reconciliation of home as safe harbour with home as enabling point of departure is represented here, as in Colette's *La Vagabonde*, as incompatible with marriage.

Germaine Beaumont,⁸ another member of the 'forgotten generation' and for a time Colette's secretary, also opens her prize-winning novel *Piège* with the heroine's flight from an unhappy relationship. Roberte, the narrator-heroine, is escaping Paris as the site of her liaison with a dominating, unfaithful man; driving fast without any clear sense of destination, she eventually crashes the car but is rescued and finds a safe haven in which to recover in Normandy. The strange and seductive character she meets there and comes to love, known as Monsieur Maurice, lives in a great Gothic manor house surrounded by the wild beauty of the Normandy coast – a house that like its owner will soon prove to offer more mystery and enigma than security. But Roberte indulges the dream of buying a smaller house close by, and living there not with Maurice but near enough to pursue their relationship. It is a 'petit manoir aux fenêtres closes', charming for its lack of symmetry, 'attachante dans son désordre architectural' (Beaumont, 1978/1930: 169). Once the shutters are opened, panoramic views of the surrounding countryside are revealed and reflected light fills the rooms, in which Roberte imagines herself living happily alone. Roberte's dream fails, and she never succeeds in purchasing her 'petit manoir' – but by granting her heroine this brief, idyllic image of a possible future, Beaumont sketches a reconciliation between shelter ('fenêtres closes') and openness to external reality ('désordre', the wide field of vision afforded by the windows), that bears comparison to Normand and Colette's imagining of places to live that combine protection and comfort with independence and openness to what life may bring.

In Irène Nemirovsky's novels too, whilst the domestic space to which marriage consigns women is represented in terms of dull seclusion, there are brief glimpses of homely spaces that combine shelter with an enabling receptivity to experience beyond domestic walls. In the novella *La Comédie bourgeoise* (1934), the prescribed cycle of women's lives is captured through repeated images of Madeleine, first as a girl, then a wife, mother and grandmother, enclosed within the same comfortable, airless ('étouffant' [1934: 156]) house, its windows always shuttered or closed, her repressed yearning for an elsewhere figured by the road that winds through the village and stretches away to a wider world that she will never visit. In the story *Dimanche* (first published 1934), Agnès remains immured in the comfortable marital home while her husband visits his mistress and her teenage daughter rushes to a romantic rendezvous. 'Sa maison... Le refuge, la coquille close et chaude, close au bruit du dehors' (2000: 22) is Agnès's haven of peace, but it is also her prison, the embodiment of the closing off of her youthful dreams: 'Je hais cette maison, songea-t-elle tout à coup avec fièvre. Et cette paix, et ce calme!' (33). Like Normand, Nemirovsky represents domestic space as closed and oppressive, but offers fleeting images of more fulfilling forms of home, gesturing towards a resolution never fully realised within the plot. In *La Proie* (1938), Jean-Luc and Édith in the happier, pre-marriage stage of their relationship meet to make love in a small, rented room, 'chaude et sombre', the wallpaper decorated with sailing boats (1938: 16) that evoke the possibility of travel. In *Deux* (1939), a group of young friends spend a night in a hotel room lit by the protective

warmth of a fire, furnished with ordinary comfort. A 'vieux lit sombre, la courtepoinette à fleurs, froissée, jetée à terre, le petit canapé rose' (1939: 13) compose a homely setting, but one that houses a group of young women and men flouting the sexual conventions that will eventually see them marry and settle into domesticity. Here, warm and safe in the firelit room, they envisage open futures that in the course of the novel the future will curtail: 'Ah! Qu'il fallait se hâter de respirer, d'embrasser, de boire, de faire l'amour !' (12)

Female-authored French fiction of the inter-war years repeatedly registers the tension between a need to flee entrapment in male-controlled domesticity, and the desire for a home that embodies material and emotional security. The tension is rarely resolved at the level of plot, but each of the texts discussed here includes at least some fleeting image of a form of home that would unite the sheltering warmth of domestic space with openness to wider experience. This same duality, and its possible resolution, find eloquent expression in Colette's inter-war writings.

Colette and the meanings of home

Colette's evocations of a happy childhood home, most notably in the semi-autobiographical *La Maison de Claudine* (1922) and *Sido* (1930), are central to her fame, and provide a richly moving portrayal of home as, in Bachelard's words, 'notre coin du monde, premier univers, cosmos' (Bachelard, 1958: 105). The family home in the Burgundy village of St-Sauveur is portrayed as suffused with the unconditional, enabling love of Colette's mother, Sido, the house 'au centre d'une rose de jardins, de vents, de rayons, dont aucun secteur n'échappait tout à fait à l'influence de ma mère' (in *Sido*, Colette, 1991: 503). Yet house and garden are also portrayed as open to the elements, the fence always 'tordue, arrachée au ciment de son mur, emportée et brandie en l'air pas les bras invincibles d'une glycine centenaire' (*La Maison de Claudine*, 1986: 968), the garden's borders traversed by winds, light, floating seeds and passing animals, by children free to wander as they will, and by birdsong and the voices of neighbours.

Home in its positive sense was already evoked in *Chéri* (1920) in the rose-tinted warmth of Léa's bedroom and the well-ordered domesticity of her house, where a Chéri damaged by the casual neglect of his childhood discovers nurturing love and healing care. But Chéri is an adult, not a child, and to survive in adult life requires progression rather than stasis. Chéri observes the rites of passage into adult masculinity, marrying, acquiring a house, going off to war – but when in the sequel novel *La Fin de Chéri* (1926), he returns as a war-wounded hero, he finds a Paris bent on efficient modernity and indifferent to his needs, a sense of rejection materialised in the icy whites of his wife's dresses 'perlée de blanc (...) couleur de neige' (1991: 173) and the cold blues and whites in which she has decorated their house. Memories of the warmth and tenderness he knew with Léa haunt Chéri and erase the present, the impossibility of returning to a beloved past finally leaving no alternative but death.

The destructive power of nostalgia for a lost paradise is equally present in *La Chatte* (1933), where the male hero, Alain, leaves the home in which he has grown up with his widowed mother, 'son domaine d'enfant privilégié, qu'il chérissait et croyait connaître' (1991: 821), to marry the capable, future-oriented Camille and live with her in a modern apartment. The hard surfaces, harsh lighting and grating sounds of their new home – 'chocs sourds de tremplin, gifles métalliques, grincements de bateau à l'ancre, musiques jugulées – qu'exhale la vie discordante d'une maison neuve' (866–7) – contrast sharply with the familiar comforts and sensory richness of the house and garden he has left, and Alain fails to establish a new, adult life with Camille. He retreats to the maternal garden with Saha, the cat he loves and who is the emanation of the fantasised purity, integrity and perfection of his past. Though the novel is sympathetic to Alain's recoil from modernity, the final

image of him is focalised by Camille, and shows a man in outgrown pyjamas, indifferent to his wife's departure as he lies in the grass of his childhood garden, playing with unripe chestnuts, 'verts et hérissés' (891), in an unobtrusive echo of Alain's own failure to 'ripen'.

Chéri and Alain turn away from the demands of male adulthood and attempt to retreat to the shelter of remembered happiness. The novels convey the magnetic pull of past spaces of belonging, but also the impossibility of return: Chéri's recognition of this leads him to suicide; Alain ends the novel in stasis, a less human figure than the cat Saha who, in contrast to his self-absorption, 'suivait humainement le départ de Camille' (Colette, 1991: 891). But where it is through women's stories that Colette depicts the tension between the pull of home and that of 'mobilité [...] changement' (de Certeau, 1980: 209), the outcome is different and more hopeful. Women in Colette's world may share a lasting nostalgia for a lost *espace heureux*, but they are also driven by a need to adapt, to survive, to confront life's challenges and explore its possibilities, including those that have been denied to them as women. The female appetite for life resounds throughout Colette's work: 'une femme ne peut guère mourir de chagrin. C'est une bête si solide, si dure à tuer!' (*La Vagabonde*, Colette, 1984: 1087). 'Encore une fois je m'écrie: "Que c'est solide, une femme!" (*Dans la foule*, 1986: 608).

The inter-war novels still at times register Claudine's sense of living in the marital home as living on male territory. *Duo* (1934) takes place in Michel's ancestral home, Cransac, of which he is deeply fond. To his wife Alice, it is only a rather ugly 'gentilhommière épaisse et accroupie' (1991: 916), but Alice creates for herself a provisional homely space through her love of gardens – the natural world is frequently focalised from Alice's point of view – and through her visits to the kitchen, the domain of the old family housekeeper Maria, but a space where Alice also feels at home: 'comme tout est propre, prévu, comme tout est féminin, ici' (964). The house as a whole though belongs to and is expressive of Michel. *Duo* is the story of the end of a marriage: Michel discovers his wife's brief infidelity, to Alice no more than a 'sottise, inexcusable et sans importance' (919), but to Michel an 'ignominie' from which their marriage, and he himself, cannot recover, so that when towards the novel's close Michel drowns in the nearby river, the implication is that he has committed suicide. Alice leaves Cransac and finds equally unbearable the prospect of returning to live in the marital apartment in the city. In the novel's sequel, *Le Toutounier* (1939), she returns to the shabby, overcrowded apartment in Paris where she grew up with her three sisters, two of whom still live there. Smelling of tobacco and perfume, dense with memories of their shared girlhood as well as the paraphernalia of their current lives, and dominated by the comfortably well-worn leather couch – the 'toutounier natal' (1986: 1218) – on which they sometimes all fall asleep, the sororal home provides a protective base for the sisters' impecunious, hard-working lives. If they share a commitment to 'vies pures' (1233), their 'purity' has little to do with sexual chastity but refers rather to their proud integrity as 'filles pures et dédaigneuses, fringantes sur leurs talons tournés, et qui toisaient l'amour sans considération, d'un air de dire: « Pousse-toi un peu, mon vieux, fais-toi petit ... Avant toi, il y a la faim, la férocité et le besoin de rire... » (1233). At the novel's close, after a last night of 'la sauvage et chaste habitude du sommeil en commun' (1270), two sisters prepare to leave to join lovers and to travel, while Alice will stay, provisionally, in order to 'nettoyer, restaurer le gîte préféré' (1270), for herself and for them all: 'Il se peut qu'elles reviennent' (1270). The future remains open, but each sister carries with her the knowledge of a safe haven of unsentimental sisterhood that will always be there to receive them, as inscribed in the 'Paragraphe VII du code toutounier: "Ce qui est à toi est à moi, ce qui est à moi est à toi"' (1268).

It is in *La Naissance du jour* (1928) that Colette creates perhaps her most compelling portrait of a woman at home in her chosen dwelling and at home in the world. The narrator, a crafted version of Colette herself ('Imaginez-vous que je fais mon portrait? Patience: c'est seulement mon modèle', 1991: 275), has lived in many houses ('D'autres pays m'ont bercée', 282), but has come

provisionally to rest in this one, perhaps her last, in sun-warmed Provence with its velvety night skies, sounds of the sea, scents of salt, pine, eucalyptus and the fig-tree's 'odeur de lait et de foin en fleurs' (314). The house is open and hospitable, welcoming friends and a would-be lover for meals and conversation, the doors 'sans verrou' (284). But its garden plants and flowers, its animals and its owner also revive at the departure of 'les intrus' (301) and breathe in the 'bien-être aéré' (315) of solitude. Like all the female-authored images of good homes discussed above, this house is distinguished by the absence of a male proprietor: it is a 'logis privé de maître' (280). If the Colette-narrator sometimes sets a second place at table opposite her own, this is for 'l'ami qui vient et s'en va, ce n'est plus celui du maître du logis qui foule, aux heures nocturnes, le sonore plancher d'une chambre là-haut' (280). It is a female space, visited but neither owned nor inhabited by male friends and lovers.

The representation of domestic space as both refuge and open to the outside world has its counterpart in the book's representation of time. The pull of the past proves destructive for both Chéri and Alain, though for Alice a return to origins provides a space of healing and a safe point of access to the future. Here chronological time gives way to a less linear model in which a sense of past and future enhances the present moment. *La Naissance du jour* takes place in a continuous present as the narrator spends the summer writing, gardening, swimming, receiving visits and sharing outings with friends, and mingling memories with reflections on love, ageing and mortality. The house in Provence is just one in a sequence of homes, but it has absorbed the memory of its predecessors, recalling earlier beloved dwellings not with nostalgia but with a sense of enrichment, especially the home of childhood suffused with the presence of Sido. 'Tout est ressemblant aux premières années de ma vie, et je reconnais peu à peu (...) à une sérénité dont je sens de loin le souffle (...), je reconnais le chemin du retour' (280). The sense of safety provided by the home of origin carries forward, and allows the subject to look back, and outwards onto the present, and also forwards without fear: *La Naissance du jour* envisages with some tranquillity a future that will include old age and death, as the narrator plants fruit-trees of which she will never see the fruit (327), and emulates Sido's embrace of 'le chic suprême du savoir-décliner' (371). Home as 'espace aimé', 'lieu protégé' is reimagined not as the lost paradise nor the destination of a woman's story, but as an internalised feeling of belonging that can be temporarily materialised in more than one place. In Colette's as in much inter-war women's fiction, such a reconciliation of home's dual meanings may incorporate heterosexual love, evoked by the figure of the 'ami qui vient et s'en va', but can only be realised outside the normative, patriarchal models of domestic cohabitation and marriage.

Conclusion

Home is a word resonant with emotion. It evokes belonging, safety, refuge from the clamouring demands of the social world. Yet 'leaving home' is also synonymous with growing up and achieving independence, with entering the wider space of potential beyond domestic walls. For women, these dual meanings of home as a place have particular significance, because historically – and in many places still today – they have been confined within domestic walls, so that the place of refuge blurs into the place of imprisonment, and external space takes on both the glamour of the forbidden and the danger and difficulty of being 'out of place'. In giving literary form to a duality that is both existentially human and socially gendered, Colette lent her uniquely eloquent voice to a theme that echoes through much women's writing of the first half of the twentieth century and particularly the inter-war years, in novels that charted the lives of French women but that have since, with few exceptions, disappeared from print and

from literary history. Colette's achievement in this regard was not only to capture with lyrical precision the conflicted intensity of the relationship to home and its gendered dimension, but also to bequeath an image of how home as emotional haven and home as enabling point of access to a wider world might be reconciled, as her female protagonists create for themselves homes that express their sense of belonging in the world.

Notes

1. Renaud to Claudine in *La Retraite sentimentale*: « Oh ! ma vagabonde assise !... » (1984: 860).
2. The Montigny garden in *La Retraite sentimentale* prefigures the garden of Colette's now famous childhood home, described in the 1922 *La Maison de Claudine* and other semi-autobiographical texts.
3. See Holmes and Tarr (2005).
4. See Roberts (1994); Holmes (2018) pp. 96–101.
5. In 1929 the literary critic Jean Larnac stated that numbers of women writers were higher than ever before in France, noting that the *Société des gens de lettres* counted 535 women out of 3,077 members, so a little more than one sixth of the total (Larnac, 1929: 223).
6. See for example Kershaw (2010); Holmes (2018), pp. 107–14.
7. Suzanne Normand (1895–1981) was a prolific novelist and journalist about whom (as yet) I have been able to discover little, but whose major period of production was the 1920s and 30s.
8. Beaumont (1890–1983) was a journalist and novelist well-known in her time. The daughter of Colette's close friend Annie de Pène (also a writer), who died in 1918, she worked with Colette on the literary pages of *Le Matin* in the early 1920s and was the author of *Colette par elle-même* (1957, Éditions du Seuil). Her novel *Piège* won the Prix Renaudot in 1930.

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Author biography

Diana Holmes is Professor of French at the University of Leeds. She has published widely on French women's writing from the late nineteenth century to the present, across the hierarchy of culture from 'high' to 'low' brow, with a particular interest in what women choose to read. Her book, *Middlebrow Matters: Women's Reading and the Literary Canon in France since the Belle Époque* (Liverpool University Press, 2018), was awarded the MLA Scaglione Prize for French and Francophone Studies, 2019. She also works on film and co-edits the Manchester University Press series *French Film Directors*.