

Elaine Marks

Lesbian Intertextuality

So the first problem of mythic thought is that women must be domesticated.

—Claude Lévi-Strauss

Every text is absorption and transformation of a multiplicity of other texts.

—Julia Kristeva

Women have always loved women. The investigation and quarrels about causes do not interest me here, although in other contexts they may illuminate and incite. My corpus, composed of written texts, fiction and nonfiction, many fragments, by women and men, mostly French, from Sappho through Baudelaire to Wittig (the Lesbos-Paris axis), proposes other enigmas. Through a network of anecdotes—formalized gossip that gives pleasure—and proper names—those of the protagonists who transmit and receive messages—I shall attempt to elucidate models and impose prophetic fictions.¹

1. This paper was nourished by four texts: Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon, 1973); Jeannette Foster, *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (Baltimore: Diana Press, 1975), originally published in 1956; Jules Michelet, *La sorcière* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1966), originally published in 1862; Edith Mora, *Sappho* (Paris: Flammarion, 1966). I discovered, after my article was completed, Bertha Harris's delightful essay "The More Profound Nationality of Their Lesbianism: Lesbian Society in Paris in the 1920's," in *Amazon Expedition: A Lesbian-Feminist Anthology*, ed. Phyllis Birkby, Bertha Harris, Jill Johnston, Esther Newton, Jane O'Wyatt (Washington, N.J.: Times Change Press, 1973), pp. 77-88.

Who's Who

Fictional characters are of two kinds. There are those who are born in the words of the text and those whose existence in a text is due to a prior existence in what it is difficult not to call "life." Most women writers and many famous and infamous women in history have become fictional characters of the second kind. Because of their double heritage they play an important role in the reader's imagination. It would be insufficient to talk about lesbianism and literature in France and mention only the better known characters.² Space must also be allotted for rumor about Louise Labé and Clémence de Bourges, the Duchesse de Berry and Mlle de Mouchy, Marie Antoinette and Mme de Lamballe, George Sand and Marie Dorval, Germaine de Staël and Juliette Récamier, as well as for facts about Adrienne Mounier and Sylvia Beach, Marie Laurencin and Suzanne Morand, Colette and the Marquise de Belbeuf, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus and Germaine de Castro, Natalie Clifford-Barney and a host of women including Renée Vivien, Liane de Pougy,

2. Martial's Bassa, Lucian's courtesans, Sappho in Brantôme's *Vie des dames galantes* (1665); Mlle Hobart in Hamilton's *Mémoires de la vie du Comte de Gramont* (1713); Mlle d'Eon, Mlle de Raucourt, Mme de Furiel, Mlle Sappho in "Apologie de la secte anandryne" (1784); the Mother Superior in Diderot's *La religieuse* (1796); Camille in Latouche's *Fragoletta* (1829); Mlle de Maupin in Gautier's *Mlle de Maupin* (1835); Margarita-Euphémia Porrabénil, Marquise de San Réal and Paquita Valdès in Balzac's *La fille aux yeux d'or* (1835); Sappho, Delphine, and Hippolyte in Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* (1857); Sappho and the friends in Verlaine's *Parallèlement* (1867); the black woman in Mallarmé's "La négresse" (1866), and the two nymphs in his "L'après-midi d'un faune" (1875); Suzanne Haffner and the Marquise d'Españet in Zola's *La curée* (1871), and Nana and Satin in his *Nana* (1879); Madeleine, Pauline in Maupassant's *La femme de Paul* (1881); Sappho in Daudet's *Sappho* (1884); Bilitis, Sappho, Mnasidika in Pierre Louÿs's *Chansons de Bilitis* (1894); Claudine, Aimée and Luce Lanthenay, Mlle Sergent, Rézi, Miss Flossie in Colette's Claudine novels (1900-1904); Mlle Vinteuil and "son amie," Albertine, Léa, Andrée, Odette, Gilberte, Mme Verdurin, Oriane de Guermantes, Rachel in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1913-1927); Marie Bonifas in Jacques de Lacretelle's *La Bonifas* (1925); la Chevalière, Renée Vivien, Amalia X . . . , Lucienne de . . . , the Ladies of Llangollen in Colette's *Le pur et l'impur* (1932); Inès Serrano in Sartre's *Huis clos* (1944); Céline in Christiane Rochefort's *Stances à Sophie* (1963); Je, Isabelle, Hermine in Violette Leduc's *La bâtarde* (1964) and Thérèse, Isabelle in her *Thérèse et Isabelle* (1966); the *guérillères* in Monique Wittig's *Les guérillères* (1969), and J/e in her *Le corps lesbien* (1973).

Romaine Brooks, the Duchesse de Clermont-Tonnerre, Dolly Wilde.

Name-dropping in this instance is an essential preliminary activity for if Gomorrha, as Colette observed in a criticism of Proust, is not nearly as vast or as well organized as Sodom, it is nonetheless a small, cohesive world in which connections between bed and text are numerous. This is particularly true during the *belle époque* when, in the wake of an emerging feminist movement, women writers, many of whom were lesbian, appeared on the French literary scene. They came from America and England, from the demi-monde, from the bourgeoisie. A central figure in this constellation of "Sapho 1900, Sapho cent pour cent"³ is Natalie Clifford-Barney, an American living in Paris who had great wealth, many paramours, and a prestigious salon. She was a crossroads of lesbian associations and appeared, barely fictionalized, in the texts of many of the writers of the period: as Moonbeam and Miss Flossie in Liane de Pougy's *Idylle saphique* (1901), as Miss Flossie in Colette's *Claudine s'en va* (1903), as Lorély in Renée Vivien's *Une femme m'apparut* (1904), as Geraldine O'Brookomore in Ronald Firbank's *Inclinations* (1916), as the Amazon in Rémy de Gourmont's *Lettres intimes à l'amazone* (1927), as Evangeline Musset in Djuna Barnes's *Ladies Almanack* (1928), as Valérie Seymour in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), as Laurette in Lucie Delarue-Mardrus's *L'ange et le pervers* (1934). Only George Sand has been the imputed model for as many literary heroines.

The Natalie Clifford-Barney connection takes us further afield to Marie Souvestre, whose fashionable boarding schools for girls—Les Ruches at Fontainebleau and Allenswood near Wimbledon Common—have been used as referents in texts as diverse as Eleanor Roosevelt's *This is My Story* (1939), Dorothy Strachey Bussy's *Olivia* (1941), and Michael Holroyd's biography of Lytton Strachey (1968). Natalie Clifford-Barney attended Les Ruches after Marie Souvestre had left France for England, but she was already involved in the kind of *amitié passionnée* that precipitated Marie Souvestre's departure. Through an early

3. Phrase used by André Billy in his *L'époque 1900* (Paris: Editions Jules Tallandier, 1951), p. 227.

American lover, Eva Palmer, mentioned by Renée Vivien in *Une femme m'apparut* and by Colette in *Mes apprentissages* (1936), Natalie Clifford-Barney was invited to visit Bryn Mawr College. Gertrude Stein, whom she knew, but not intimately, in Paris, used the lesbian relationship between M. Carey Thomas, president of Bryn Mawr, and Mary Gwinn in one of her first novels, *Fernhurst* (1904–1905, published in 1971). Bertrand Russell also refers to the intense Bryn Mawr scene in the first volume of his autobiography (1967). In the convergence of anecdotes and proper names a paradigm emerges. From Natalie Clifford-Barney to Marie Souvestre and M. Carey Thomas, from Parisian alcoves to a woman's school or college, we are obliged to acknowledge the inevitable presence of the Sappho model.

The Sappho Model

Sappho, Sappho, Psappha, Psappho, the lesbian from Lesbos. A confusion of facts, a profusion of semantic and phonemic connotations emanate from and surround the name. The small, ugly, lewd nymphomaniac and the beautiful poetess and muse coexist in the mind of the contemporary reader. They are part of a fragmented tradition through which we can formulate the outlines of a myth intended, like so many others, to domesticate woman's sexuality as well as, in this particular case, her relation to language.

Sappho and her island Lesbos are omnipresent in literature about women loving women, whatever the gender or sexual preference of the writer and whether or not Sappho and her island are explicitly named. Through her own poetic fragments she is the unwitting initiator of three apparently distinct models which have, in fact, a common origin: the older woman who seduces beautiful young girls, usually in a school or by extension in a convent or bordello; the older woman who commits suicide because her love for a younger man is unrequited; the woman poet as disembodied muse. The first model has its origin in those poems in which Sappho, the persona, speaks about the young women—Atthis, Anactoria, Gongyla—whom she desires. In the Greek and Latin literature that came after Sappho and in many later European texts this model, with its disguised references to

the mother-daughter incest taboo, was discarded, except for its pornographic, comic value, in favor of the two others more palatable to the transmitters of a patriarchal code. It was Plato who, in referring to her as the tenth muse, (in an epigram that may be apocryphal) removed Sappho from the sexual arena, thereby allowing for the greatness of her poetry. Ovid, in the fifteenth and last letter of his *Heroides*, "Sappho and Phaon," codified into one legend the double model of Sappho the poet and Sappho the woman burning with corporeal lust who, because of her desperate love for Phaon, leapt from the Leucadian cliffs into the sea. The suicide model includes such prominent progeny as Phaedra and Dido and should not be forgotten in the larger corpus of lesbian intertextuality.

Although there is no evidence in Sappho's poems to corroborate the notion that she did indeed have a school, religious or secular, for young women, the gynaeceum, ruled by the seductive or seducing teacher has become, since the eighteenth century, the preferred locus for most fictions about women loving women. The conventions of this topos are simple and limited, signifying in their constraints the marginal status of lesbians and lesbianism. In general men play secondary roles as fathers, spiritual advisers, or intrusive suitors. The younger woman, whose point of view usually dominates, is always passionate and innocent. If, as is usually the case when the author of the text is a woman, it is the younger woman who falls in love, the narrative is structured so as to insist on this love as an awakening. The older woman as object of the younger woman's desire is restrained and admirable, beautiful and cultivated. If the older woman plays the role of seducer-corrupter, as she does in texts written by men, she is intense and often overtly hysterical (although this does not prevent her from being admirable in her intensity). Whoever plays the aggressive role, the exchanges between the older and the younger woman are reminiscent of a mother-daughter relationship. The mother of the younger woman is either dead or in some explicit way inadequate. Her absence is implied in the young woman's insistent need for a good-night kiss. The gynaeceum, particularly when it is represented by a school, also controls time. Time limits are set by the school calendar whose inexorable end announces the fatal sep-

aration, which may involve a death. Temporal structures reiterate the almost universally accepted notion that a schoolgirl crush is but a phase in the emotional development of the young woman, something that will pass. The denouement in these lesbian fairy tales is often brought about by a public event during which private passions explode.

The lesbian fairy tale based on the Sappho model is written by men of letters in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and by women and men of letters in the twentieth. I have chosen the term fairy tale in order to accentuate the distance from an apparent, transparent "real" and to insist on structural similarities between diverse fictions: the stock characters and stock situations; the rude or blissful awakening of sleeping beauty; the lesbian as good or bad fairy who is fate. The system of relationships in lesbian fairy tales, the reiterated network of obsessions reinforce an ideological system of stereotypes based on a synthesis of religious and psychological dogma.

Some of the texts that must be included within the Sappho model, whether they are written by women or by men, whether or not the gynæceum is the locus, present, in strikingly similar terms, an explicit apology for lesbianism: the "Apologie de la secte anandryne" in *L'espion anglais*, "Delphine et Hippolyte," *L'idylle saphique*, *Claudine en ménage*, passages in *Le pur et l'impur* and the *Stances à Sophie*. This apology, made by a female character, is not to be understood as authorial endorsement of women loving women; on the contrary, the intention may be ironic. But it does point to a specific mode of discourse which is a significant feature of lesbian intertextuality.

The "Apologie de la secte anandryne" contains the first and most complete formulation of this discourse. The text is composed of a speech purportedly delivered on 28 March 1778 by Mlle de Raucourt, who was in fact a celebrated actress, lesbian, and active member of the flourishing *secte des anandrynes*. Mlle de Raucourt is a narrator thrice removed in the chain of reporting, since it is Mlle Sappho who is telling her story to a male narrator who is writing it to a friend and to the reader. This combination of remote narrative distance with the use of characters for whom there are referents beyond the text is frequent in writing about lesbians. Brantôme employs similar devices in his *Vie des dames*

galantes and Colette in *Le pur et l'impur*. Lesbianism often appears in literature as something about which one has heard and perhaps, because lesbianism is considered unusual, it requires the kind of validation that only real names can confer.

The speech forms part of the initiation rite during which Mlle Sapho, a novice, is presented to the other members of the sect by her mother-teacher Mme de Furiel. (The mother-daughter, teacher-pupil categories are referred to constantly, as is the notion of model. The mother-teacher incubus is a model for the daughter-pupil succubus, who will in turn become a model.) The terms of the argument are quite simple: men, although they are initially exciting, provide inadequate physical and moral satisfaction; men are responsible for woman's physical suffering both in love-making and in the pains of childbirth: "Kisses will discolor your face, caresses will wither your breasts, your belly will lose its elasticity through pregnancies, your secret charms will be ruined by childbirth."⁴ Men cause women mental suffering as well because they tire quickly of their wives. Heterosexuality is presented by means of such words as "pain," "blood," "slaughter," "care," "anxiety," "torment"; man is "perfidious," "fickle," "a cheat." The most important point in the argument is not, however, the perfidy of men but the glorification of the pleasures "true, pure, long-lasting and without remorse" (170) that exist between women: "In the intimacy between women there are no frightening and painful preliminaries; everything is pleasure (*jouissance*); each day, each hour, each minute this attachment is easily renewed; it is like waves of love which follow each other unceasingly as do those of the sea" (271). This complete harmony, this constant pleasure, does not exist, according to the apology, between women and men. Delphine delivers the same message to Hippolyte, Miss Flossie to Annhine, Claudine and Rézi to each other. Colette suggests it, tentatively, in *Le pur et l'impur* and then retracts it. The possibility of this paradise of oceanic bliss can only occur in a woman's world, between "sisters" (265).

4. "Apologie de la secte anandryne," in *L'espion anglais ou correspondance secrète entre Milord All'Eye et Milord All'Ear* (London: John Adamson, 1784), Vol. 10, p. 274. The first four volumes of *L'espion anglais* were written by Mathieu François Pidanzat de Mairobert. The authorship of the last six volumes is unknown.

The "Apologie de la secte anandryne" is the one text in the corpus I have consulted that supplements this defense of lesbianism with an idyllic image of the continuity of the cult, the vision of a utopia in which "maternal tenderness" replaces the "unrestrained passion of men" (276), in which wealth is shared, in which elegance of dress and abundance of jewels are requisites of beauty and useful in proselytizing. The evangelical spirit is strong in the "Apologie de la secte anandryne." The goal of the sect is the conversion of all women, particularly aristocratic women, to lesbianism because lesbianism is the most natural, the most virtuous, and the most pleasurable way of life. This is a unique apology, an extreme and rare formulation of the Sappho model in which lesbianism has an equally glorious past, present, and future. I cannot help but wonder about the identity of the unknown author.

From Lascivious Tribade to Revolutionary Signifier

Images of the lesbian are related in any given time and place to prevalent images of women. They are influenced by the same fear, loathing, or ignorance of female sexuality apparently subsumed by male (and in their wake female) psyches under the broader category, mysteries of life and death, or universal misogyny and gynophobia. From Martial to Brantôme the lesbian character is, within the context of the male anecdote, grotesque, an exaggeratedly comic version of the Sappho model reduced to her sexual preference. She is generally referred to as a tribade, from the Greek verb *tribadein*, meaning to rub. The tribade lies on top of her partner, whom she rubs with her unusually large clitoris. The tribade is lascivious because she enjoys what she does and grotesque because she imitates a man. The tribade is a social menace because, so the rumor runs within the text, she often succeeds. The burning question thus arises: does one woman lying on top of another and rubbing constitute adultery? By means of this male obsession the tribade is assimilated into accepted patterns of heterosexuality and enters into fiction. In the texts of Martial, Lucian, and Brantôme, who incorporates and recapitulates his predecessors, the tribade is always seen at a distance; she is talked about, reported on, spied on. This dis-

tance reinforces her status as a weird, comic object. But were it not for the hyperbolic and hypothetical size of her clitoris she would be completely incomprehensible. The tribade has value as a sexual being only insofar as she participates in the worship of the phallus. The phallus is always present as prime mover in the lesbian discourse of male scriptors.

The lesbian who appears in prose texts by male writers of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries may be a possessed hysteric, a charismatic evangelist, or a lascivious glutton guilty of profaning either the law of God or the natural law or both. She tries to seduce a younger woman and sometimes succeeds. She is often responsible for the death of a male figure. She is always an outlaw, a powerful challenge to one of society's most cherished principles, sexual order. The world of the text in which she appears is immediately thrown into confusion. The confusion ends with her death or disappearance, or that of her victim, or of her male antagonist. From Martial's Bassa and Lucian's Megilla, model tribades of antiquity, to the lesbians of Diderot, Balzac, Proust, and Sartre, the female homosexual incarnating the Sappho model has moved from a small corner of the canvas to a central position. The comic, lascivious tribade lives on in the demonic corrupter, but in general the imitation of the male is less pronounced than the affirmation of incomprehensible femininity.

The lesbian in lyric poetry written by men, from Pontus de Tyard's "Élégie pour une dame énamourée d'une autre dame" to Pierre Louÿs's *Chansons de Bilitis*, bears little resemblance to her prose sister. The discourse on lesbians in prose narrative tends to reproduce some culturally accepted derogatory point of view on women loving women, whereas the lyric poem tends to represent the lesbian as synonymous with a mysterious world of feminine pleasure. The prose narrative usually uses the lesbian for social or psychological censorious reporting on aberrant female behavior; the lyric poem projects through the lesbian an unattainable dream of erotic love in the absence of the censor.

A major thematic transformation takes place when women begin to write about women loving women. The experience of loving a woman is, for the narrative voice, *the* experience of awakening, the revelation of an unknown, unsuspected world

which, once glimpsed, can never be ignored. It is a momentous discovery whose importance within the text and beyond was until recently obscured by the weighty screen of psychological misreadings. Women's narratives were examined for signs of deviant behavior that would reveal simplified, vulgarized Freudian categories. The lesbian had to be a pre-Oedipal polymorphous perverse child, full of rage because of an early, deprived relationship with the mother, obsessed with death, voraciously hungry for love, exorbitantly demanding and dependent. Critics reveled in images of alimentary deprivation that would prove the prevalence of the oral element in the affective life of the lesbian character. Indeed, whatever happened to the lesbian within the text, she was submerged from without by the ruling orthodoxy.

Recent feminist critics have reversed these judgments, turning condemnation of regressive behavior into exploration of uncharted modes of affectivity. Hysteria and oceanic feeling are exalted. The Minoan-Mycenean civilization that preceded the Oedipal institution of patriarchal law is glorified. What began a long time ago as the domestication of Sappho has become a concerted effort to imagine a world before the domestication of women, before the deliberate taming of her sexuality and her language. In such a world the woman who loves women and writes is the central figure in a new mythology.

Colette, the Foremother

Colette, the foremother, left God out and was accused by the morally serious and believing of frivolity. Critics, female and male, took their revenge. Silence or banter surrounded her six-year liaison with the Marquise de Belbeuf. The text which she considered to be her most important, *Le pur et l'impur*, was either ignored or treated as a bizarre excrescence. The preponderant role played by women, alone and together, in her writings, as mothers and daughters, as sisters, as friends, as lovers, received less recognition than the more obvious but fundamentally less important relationships between women and men. Colette occupies a privileged place and therefore takes up most space in a study of lesbian intertextuality. Her texts, like Brantôme's *Vie des*

dames galantes, recapitulate an earlier tradition, but they also announce new departures. In 1900, for the first time since Sappho, the narrator Claudine in *Claudine à l'école* looks at another woman as an object of pleasure and without any excuses describes her pleasure. A great revolution had begun:

She is like a cat caressing, delicate and sensitive, incredibly winning. I like to look at her pink little blond's face, her golden eyes with their curly lashes. Beautiful eyes that are always ready to smile! They oblige the young men to turn around when she goes out. Often, while we are chatting at the door of her excited little class, Mlle Sergent walks past us to go to her room, without a word, staring at us with a jealous, searching gaze. Her silence tells my new friend and me that she is furious at seeing us get on so well together.⁵

Everyone is looking at Aimée Lanthenay: Claudine, the young boys, Mlle Sergent. Voyeurism, in contrast to what transpires in male novels, is neither secret nor cerebral. It is a public activity. The originality of Claudine's voyeurism is that it is directly related to her appetites. What is less original are Claudine's insolence and impertinence, the marks of the titillated and titillating schoolgirl whose desire for Aimée and later for Rézi recalls the presence of the lesbian in many turn-of-the-century texts, a male creation, the summum of naughtiness.

From Colette's Claudine to Violette Leduc's *Je and Thérèse*, to Monique Wittig's *J/e*, female voyeurism gains in intensity as it focuses on the relation between the self and the other. At the same time the stereotypical posturing of the curious adolescent characteristic of Claudine progressively diminishes, finally disappears. The movement from Claudine to *J/e* is a movement from self-consciousness in culture to self-consciousness in writing, from an attempt at portraying new attitudes in an old language to an attempt at creating a language capable of speaking the unspoken in Western literature—female sexuality with woman as namer.

"Lesbian" is a word the narrator "Colette" never uses and

5. Colette, *Claudine à l'école. Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Flammarion, 1948), Vol. 1, p. 21.

"homosexual" is reserved for men. Her female characters who are attracted to women have no labels. They do, however, fall into two major, quite traditional groups: the impudent, perverse younger woman like Claudine and perhaps Renée Vivien; the mannish woman like the Baronne de la Berche in *La fin de Chéri* (1926) or la Chevalière in *Le pur et l'impur*. The narrator's attitude toward them oscillates between a maternalistic protection—protection from the uncomprehending male, protection from the "ordinary reader" who may be smirking—and a series of mild attacks in which these women are variously seen as childish, "infantile," "adolescent," "crude," "promiscuous," or "deluded." Within this spectrum female homosexuality is sanctified by comparisons to the mother-daughter relationship. This occurs initially and most powerfully in "Nuit blanche," a prose poem in *Les vrilles de la vigne* (1908):

Because I know that then you will tighten your embrace and that if the rocking of your arms does not calm me, your kisses will become more tenacious, your hands more loving, and that you will give me pleasure as an aid, as a supreme exorcism which will drive out the demons of fever, of anger, of unrest. . . . You will give me pleasure, leaning over me, your eyes full of maternal solicitude, you who are seeking in your passionate friend, for the child you never had.⁶

All of "Colette's" empathetic attitudes toward women loving women are contained within this image and will be repeated in nonlesbian situations: in the relationships between "Colette" and "Sido," between Chéri and Léa, between all those who love passionately and exclusively. What is involved is someone younger needing protection, someone older offering a refuge and caring. The younger person receives pleasure, but the older person who gives pleasure is searching. The quest is not for the mother, the mother is always there, but for the child. The female figure who dominates in Colette's female hierarchy is the

6. Colette, "Nuit blanche" in *Les vrilles de la vigne. Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Flammarion, 1949), Vol. 3, pp. 219-20.

mother figure, Sido crying, "Where are the children?" It is also the role of the mother who loves to preside over the sexual ritual, which without her presence is incomplete.

Le pur et l'impur restates all the forms of lesbianism and all the narrative commentary on women loving women that appear in Colette's texts from 1900 to 1932. Colette is writing with and against Marcel Proust. It is obvious that the publication of *A la recherche du temps perdu* encouraged her both to deal directly with homosexuality, female and male, and to present images of female homosexuality different from Proust's febrile Gomorrha. Within the French literary tradition *Le pur et l'impur* takes its place in the exclusive company of André Gide's *Corydon* (1924) and the overture of Proust's *Sodome et Gomorrhe* (1922) as a rare example of explicit narrative commentary on homosexuality. "Renée Vivien," one of the texts included in *Le pur et l'impur*, was published in a limited edition in 1928. The mid and late 1920's, particularly in England, were *anni mirabili* for novels by women that depict important lesbian characters or references to women loving women. It is unlikely that Colette was familiar with Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) or her *Orlando* (1928), or with Rosamund Lehmann's *Dusty Answer* (1927), but she did know of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), and she obviously knew the screen version of Christa Winsloë's *Mädchen in Uniforme* (1931) for which she wrote the French subtitles.

Le pur et l'impur is a restless text. The narrator "Colette" struggles to maintain a deliberate and decent distance through time, texts, and translations from the variety of pseudonymous women loving women, the exotic, extinct species on which she reports: la Chevalière, Renée Vivien, Amalia X . . . , Lucienne de . . . , and the Ladies of Llangollen. "Colette" intrudes on and retreats from the text which is an organized mélange of reporting (anecdotes, portraits) and commentary (maxims and generalizations). The women who love women occupy the central parts of *Le pur et l'impur*. They are preceded by Charlotte, the woman who feigns pleasure to please her young male lover, and Don Juan who gives, according to his accounting, more than he receives, and followed by male homosexuals whose "theatrical cynicism" and "childishness" are redeemed by their capacity,

which the narrator insists lesbians lack, to forget the other sex completely. The only couple in *Le pur et l'impur* to receive the narrator's benediction and admiration is the couple formed by two men. "I find it in me to see in pederasty a kind of legitimacy and to acknowledge its eternal character."⁷ In the volume which "will treat sadly of pleasure" (31), this is the unique relationship which is not depicted by the narrator as an unequal exchange: one partner giving, the other receiving, in an ultimately self-destructive pattern.

Whether it be in the occasional discordance between narrative commentary and reporting, or in the shifts of tone from lyrical to ironic to lyrical, or in the sudden eruptions of moral and psychological rhetoric, the text, like the androgyne and like Renée Vivien, "wanders." The elusive text abounds in contradictions and paradoxes that reflect the narrator's variable points of view about women loving women, about what constitutes feminine/masculine behavior. Ambiguity is sustained on all levels of the text. From the mixture of real and pseudonymous anthroponyms—"Colette," Marguerite Moreno, la Chevalière—emanates a genre ambiguity (is it autobiography? is it fiction?) which mirrors the sexual ambiguity (is it female? is it male?). There is an implied equivalence between textual and sexual androgyny and travesty. The pages on la Chevalière and her group constitute an indeterminate text in which older, aristocratic women in tuxedos, wearing monocles, instruct their lower-class protégées in the ways of the respectable world. The narrator employs "these women" to insist on the sadness (her point of view), not the ridicule (but she has an eye for that too), of their impossible masculine masquerade and to reveal their ineradicable appurtenance to a woman's world. They gather together "uneasy," "haunted," in a cellar restaurant in Montmartre, seeking "a refuge, warmth and darkness" (169). There, safe temporarily from male intrusion, they indulge in an activity more subversive than love-making: they communicate with each other in woman's language. "I reveled in the admirable quickness of their half-spoken language, the exchange of threats,

7. Colette, *The Pure and the Impure*, trans. Herma Briffault, Introduction by Janet Flanner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 118.

of promises, as if, once the slow-thinking male had been banished, every message from woman to woman became clear and overwhelming, restricted to a small but infallible number of signs" (69). "Slow-thinking" but dangerous, the image of the heterosexual male emerges in the guise of a retarded brute whose shadow is always present in the narrator's commentary as a reminder to her and to the reader of the certain danger that lurks outside and within "these women." The narrator's pleasure in the spectacle of women signaling together partially corrects the constant menace and the pervasive sadness that permeate the text. It is as if, near the end of the tour, the guide discovered a fragment of what it was she had been looking for initially and had been unable to locate because the site was so cluttered. When the male is removed, when the subterranean space is occupied uniquely by la Chevalière and her group (which includes the narrator-guide), the masks fall, the women temporarily, hesitantly, come out.

The transition in the text from la Chevalière to Renée Vivien is from a nonliterary to a literary milieu of the *belle époque* and from a shy discreet butch to a vulgar *femme de lettres*. The narrator quite clearly prefers, in its purity, the unwritten, "half-spoken" woman's language of la Chevalière and her group to the "cynical opinions" and the sentimental imitative poetry of Renée Vivien. The third category of women who love women is represented by Amalia X... and Lucienne de..., the fourth by the Ladies of Llangollen. It is as if the narrator were testing herself against the portraits of these women in order to determine whether or not she was a lesbian, in order to determine the limits of her understanding and her compassion. "Colette's" central obsession is with the women who imitate men (la Chevalière, Lucienne de..., Lady Eleanor Butler) and thereby violate what would seem to be the narrator's fantasm of an exclusively woman's world. "You see, when a woman remains a woman, she is a complete human being. She lacks nothing, even insofar as her *amie* is concerned. But if she ever gets it into her head to try to be a man, then she's grotesque. What is more ridiculous, what is sadder, than a woman pretending to be a man?" (86). This judgment, pronounced by the wise Amalia X..., an aging Tunisian Jewess who functions here as a second narrator, represents,

I think, the simplest but most profound of "Colette's" conclusions. The woman who imitates a man, either in love or in literature, is not an acceptable model for a woman who loves women.

Because the narrator saves them for the end, the reader assumes that the Ladies of Llangollen will be the uniquely successful couple. But the Ladies of Llangollen are set up to fall from the narrator's grace in the course of her writing about them. The pastoral tone of the introductory hymn to the Ladies' mutual love—"I want to speak with dignity, that is, with warmth, of what I call the noble season of feminine passion" (91)—is not sustained. The idyllic aura that surrounds the multiple images of togetherness, "the magic of this radiant friendship," is dissipated slowly by a change in point of view. Light mockery transforms the perfect couple into a pathetic, fragile couple. The final step is the destruction by implication and direct castigation of the original ideal image. "As usual with perfectly happy people, the younger woman neglected all means of expression and, mute, became a sweet shadow. She was no longer Sarah Ponsonby, but a part of that double person called 'we.' She even lost her name, which Lady Eleanor almost never mentioned in the diary. From then on she was called 'Beloved' and 'Better Half' and 'Delight of my heart'" (97). "Colette" interpellates Lady Eleanor Butler and accuses her of three crimes: eliminating Sarah Ponsonby's identity, behaving like a man, and creating, through her diary, a fabulous fiction. The narrator challenges "stout-hearted Eleanor's" version of the Ladies of Llangollen by imagining Sarah Ponsonby's subversive diary. The text ends with a curious reversal: a short letter written by Sarah Ponsonby after the death of Lady Eleanor Butler in which she speaks neither of her sorrow nor of her lost friend but, like Colette's mother "Sido" in *La naissance du jour* (1928), of flowers that may bloom. Although "Colette" is obliged to accept the report of the Ladies of Llangollen's fifty-year idyll, her comments betray her suspicion that it was a romantic delusion systematically sustained by Lady Eleanor Butler through her diary. But if the couple composed of women together is doomed a priori the woman alone who loves women is privileged. She has for "Colette" a *magie suggestive* that belongs to the mother-teacher-seducer exemplified by "Sido" and "Colette" herself, the signifiers of the Sappho model.

The narrator's moral and psychological conclusions which the reader distills from the totality of the text imply that "Colette" is not nearly as interested in lesbians as she is in women and the possibilities of their survival. She attempts to locate through an exploration of female sexual behavior and frequent modulations in point of view, what apparently works, what really goes on and at what price. Unlike her successors in the examination of the "dark continent" of female sexuality, Violette Leduc or Monique Wittig, Colette does not focus on love-making or the celebration of the female body. Rather she insists throughout *Le pur et l'impur* that "In no way is it passion that fosters the devotion of two women, but rather a feeling of kinship" (92), by which she means "similarities." Women who love women come together in Colette's world because they are fleeing from a painful experience with a man and are looking for a *retraite sentimentale*, "Sido's" warmth with its attendant garden and animals. Lesbianism is a *pis aller*. It is a copy of either mother-daughter or male-female love or both.

If homosexual and heterosexual coupling are unsatisfactory, if promiscuity is undesirable, then what remains is the single woman writing alone about woman's sexuality. The narrator "Colette" is almost never implicated in sexual activity, but is always, like her male predecessors, reporting on the activities of other women. When she removes the Sappho model from the schoolroom, she keeps it for herself. In Colette's ultimate expression of the Sappho model, Sappho fills her erotic needs through her creations and her readers.

The Death of God/The Birth of the Lesbian-Feminist

There is no one person in or out of fiction who represents a stronger challenge to the Judeo-Christian tradition, to patriarchy and phallocentrism than the lesbian-feminist. After the end-of-the-century wailings over the death of the ideal God, after the aesthetic retreats and constructions of the dandys in life and art, after the liberation of the male imagination through surrealist techniques, after the existentialist images of male fraternity—the band of courageous brothers facing nothingness together, or battle, and creating heroic portraits of man's dig-

nity, man's fate, man's hope—the women began, ever so slowly, to see connections between production and reproduction, to masturbate consciously, to explore the “dark continent,” and to write. The most subversive voices of the century are, and will be, in their texts. Because they are trying to displace the phallus, they propose a new pleasure and a new imagery. They propose new relationships to gender and pronouns, to the jejeune past, the hysterical present, and the luminous future. They do not intend to save the world because salvation died with God, but to create hyperbolic, sensuous fictions that illuminate possibilities for the woman as narrator and the woman as reader.

What breaks down in this new prophetic universe is the God-ruled phallogocentric system and the imaginative sensibility it exploited. As outsiders to traditional gender semiotics, innovative lesbian-feminist writers invent new forms. The established relations between the traditional female/male love story and the mythology used to transmit the story are no longer operative. The veneration of male figures and the need for their approbation disappear and with them the old categories of patriarchal solid space and past time. The elimination of the female/male opposition within the text does not, of course, eliminate feminine/masculine as biological entities or cultural signs, but the absence of the masculine figure from the text makes it possible to diminish a primary source of conflict and to reinterpret such historically male-created negative images of femininity as the Medusa, the witch, or the hysteric. The I/you opposition remains, but the other is now also familiar, familial—a sister, a friend.

The differences that we find in the textual representation of female homosexuality in Colette, in Violette Leduc, and in Monique Wittig are related significantly to the literary and social codes of the periods in which these writers began to write. There would seem to be homology between Colette and the *belle époque*, between Leduc and the flowering of French existentialism, between Wittig and the formalist-feminist movements of the late sixties and early seventies. Colette's mother figures, Leduc's young schoolgirls, and Wittig's Amazon women recall and reproduce the *monstres sacrés* of the theater world, the precocious, anguished young women who haunted the existentialist cafés,

the romantic feminists and revolutionary feminists of the French women's liberation movement. The temporal distance between the narrative "I" and the other or others is also revealing: "Colette" is always looking back nostalgically to an exotic past in which women dominated the stage; Leduc as "I" struggles and desires in a present perfect; Wittig's *guérillères* and slashed "I" are installed in an eternal repetitive present which is already from the reader's point of view an apocalyptic future. Colette tells a fairly traditional story, remaining within the narrative norms established by nineteenth-century "realistic" fiction. Leduc also remains within this tradition, although she disrupts it thematically by insisting explicitly on the narrator's subjectivity, on her deepest feelings of shame and desire. Wittig, on the contrary, is working within another tradition in which the narrative conventions of plot and character have been, like the first person J/e, dismembered.

From Colette through Leduc to Wittig a sexual and textual revolution has taken place. The lesbian in literature has undergone a radical transformation from impertinent young woman, fragile couple, solitary writer, ecstatic schoolgirl, to aggressive lover and namer. The images recurrent in Colette's texts of two women seeking refuge or lying voluptuously in each other's arms and the lyrical descriptions of passionate adolescent love-making in Leduc's novels bear little resemblance to the gluttonous cannibalism of Wittig's truncated, anonymous J/e. Only the presence of the Sappho model remains constant, although the manner in which it informs the text is very different in *Le pur et l'impur* from what it is in *La bâtarde* and *Thérèse et Isabelle* or *Le corps lesbien*. In *Le pur et l'impur*, Sappho is mentioned only once in the derogatory phrase "the Sapphos met by chance" (93). In *La bâtarde* and *Thérèse et Isabelle*, Sappho is never mentioned and in *Le corps lesbien*, Sappho, the ruling muse, is invoked twenty-two times. The frequency of the name is almost as great as in the poems of Renée Vivien. But if Sappho's name is absent from *La bâtarde* and *Thérèse et Isabelle*, Sappho is inevitably present in the gynaeceum in which the protagonists spend their time seeking each other and making love. Sappho is also present in the narrator's passion for her mother, a passion which, in *La bâtarde*, has as its obsessive maternal object the grandmother and, in the

later volumes of Leduc's autobiography, is focused on Simone de Beauvoir. But more importantly Sappho dominates intertextually as she does in *Le corps lesbien*, through the insistence on the physical symptoms of desire, the visceral awareness of the female body, and the endless repetitions. In Sappho's own fragments the symptomatology of love, expressed by such rhetorical devices of repetition as anaphora and anadiplosis, focuses on the exchange between psyche and soma.

Repetition underlines the obsessive nature of Sappho's, Leduc's, and Wittig's texts and reveals the writers' fantasms. But these texts go beyond idiosyncratic sexual preferences toward the creation of a new mythology in which the female body is undomesticated: "If I meet you suddenly, I can't speak—my tongue is broken; a thin flame runs under my skin; seeing nothing, hearing only my own ears drumming, I drip with sweat; trembling shakes my body and I turn paler than dry grass. At such times death isn't far from me."⁸

To undomesticate women would mean to change the relationship between nature and culture and seriously to alter the configuration of culture as we knew it. This can only be realized through the creation of images powerful enough to impress themselves on the reader's mind and to resist the pressures of misinterpretation. Sappho's texts provided the elements for a new perception of female reality, but representatives of the dominant culture fashioned from these elements the myth of romantic love, using the millennial equivalence between woman and death. Sappho is much more concrete in her poetry. She is suggesting equivalences between the physical symptoms of desire and the physical symptoms of death, not between Eros and Thanatos. The female body's initial undomestication takes place in Sappho's texts. The body and its reactions are given poetic importance. The female body and the female persona's attitudes might have become a legitimate topos for lyric poetry. But the domestication process set in almost immediately, and Sappho's texts by both conscious and unconscious misinterpretations were

8. Sappho, "He is more than a hero" in *Sappho*, trans. Mary Barnard (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1958), No. 39.

incorporated into a tradition in which the independence of the female body was taboo.

There were, between Sappho and Violette Leduc, women writers who attempted to liberate women from the most obvious legal and social injustices. And although some of these writers—Christine de Pisan, Germaine de Staël, George Sand, Colette—did attack a fundamental source of woman's plight, sexual oppression, they never presented sufficiently challenging counterimages. It may well be that only a committed lesbian-feminist writer can, within our culture, succeed in transmitting cogent images of undomesticated women. In her preface to the English edition of *Le corps lesbien*, Monique Wittig situates her text among others that have lesbianism as their theme:

a theme which cannot even be described as taboo, for it has no real existence in the history of literature. Male homosexual literature has a past, it has a present. The lesbians, for their part, are silent—just as all women are as women at all levels. When one has read the poems of Sappho, Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness*, the poems of Sylvia Plath and Anais Nin, *La bâtarde* by Violette Leduc, one has read everything. Only the women's movement has proved capable of producing lesbian texts in a context of total rupture with masculine culture, texts written by women exclusively for women, careless of male approval. *Le corps lesbien* falls into this category.⁹

Violette Leduc is the only French writer Monique Wittig acknowledges as a predecessor. It is obvious that the scenes in *La bâtarde* and in *Thérèse et Isabelle* in which young girls make love are acceptable to Wittig not merely because females are making love but because the narrator as lesbian is describing her own experience. The lesbian is no longer the object of literary discourse seen from an outside point of view. She is her own heroine:

The hand was wandering through whispering snow-capped bushes, over the last frosts on the meadows, over the first buds as

9. Monique Wittig, *The Lesbian Body*, trans. David LeVay (New York: William Morrow, 1975), p. 9.

they swelled to fullness. The springtime that had been crying its impatience with the voice of tiny birds under my skin was now curving and swelling into flower. Isabelle, stretched out upon the darkness, was fastening my feet with ribbons, unwinding the swaddling bands of my alarm. With hands laid flat upon the mattress, I was immersed in the selfsame magic task as she. She was kissing what she had caressed and then, light as a feather duster, the hand began to flick, to brush the wrong way all that it had smoothed before. The sea monster in my entrails quivered. Isabelle was drinking at my breast, the right, the left, and I drank with her, sucking the milk of darkness when her lips had gone. The fingers were returning now, encircling and testing the warm weight of my breast. The fingers were pretending to be waifs in a storm; they were taking shelter inside me. A host of slaves, all with the face of Isabelle, fanned my brow, my hands.

She knelt up in the bed.

"Do you love me?"

I led her hand up to the precious tears of joy.¹⁰

The text concentrates obsessively on the actions being performed. Love-making occupies a central place in the text, although not all of the text, as in *Le corps lesbien*. But it is in large part what the text and the narrator's adventure through life are all about. These are the privileged moments, this is the paradise and the epiphany. Violette Leduc has deliberately chosen a lyrical style through which to produce the effect of joy and ecstasy. The syntax changes to accommodate longer sentences which attempt to recreate the rhythms of expectation, tension, and diffusion and to recount the gestures of both partners. Through a traditional nature code, springtime, with its flowers and its storms, invades the text associating with the pleasures of love-making the pleasures of an awakening and a renewal. It is, of course, a verbal pleasure, the moment in the writing of the narrator's greatest command over her language. The power of the word and the pleasures of the female body are intimately related. Love-making is the primary source of inspiration. It opens and defines a world whose existence had been suspected but

10. Violette Leduc, *La bâtarde*, trans. Derek Coltman, with a foreword by Simone de Beauvoir (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1965), p. 84.

never so explicitly stated. Within the context of lesbian intertextuality Violette Leduc is indeed the first French writer to take us beyond the Sappho model to Sappho's own texts—the lesbian writer writing as lesbian. But the power of this image of female love-making is weakened in *La bâtarde* by the autobiographical nature of Leduc's enterprise. As soon as the narrator and the text move out of the gynaeceum into a male-dominated world, the female body can no longer occupy the center of the stage. Because the gynaeceum and schoolgirl love are so invested with intertextual connotations and because Violette Leduc uses traditional nature codes for metaphoric support, *Thérèse et Isabelle* is not nearly as original or as disturbing a text as *Le corps lesbien*:

In this dark adored adorned gehenna say your farewells m/y very beautiful one m/y very strong one m/y very indomitable one m/y very learned one m/y very ferocious one m/y very gentle one m/y best beloved to what they, the women, call affection tenderness or gracious abandon. There is not one who is unaware of what takes place here, which has no name as yet. . . . not one will be able to bear seeing you with eyes turned up lids cut off your yellow smoking intestines spread in the hollow of your hands your tongue spat from your mouth long green strings of bile flowing over your breast, not one will be able to bear your low frenetic insistent laughter. The gleam of your teeth your joy your sorrow the hidden life of your organs your nerves their rupture their spurting forth death slow decomposition stench being devoured by worms your open skull, all will be equally unbearable to her. . . .

At this point I invoke your help m/y incomparable Sappho, give m/e by thousands the fingers that allay the wounds, give m/e the lips the tongue the saliva which draw one into the slow sweet poisoned country from which one cannot return. . . .

I discover that your skin can be lifted layer by layer, I pull, it lifts off, it coils above your knees, I pull starting at the labia. . . .¹¹

In *Le corps lesbien* Monique Wittig has created, through the incessant use of hyperbole and a refusal to employ traditional body codes, images sufficiently blatant to withstand reabsorption into male literary culture. Wittig has taken Sappho out of the gynaeceum in which she had been confined for so long. She has

11. Wittig, pp. 15, 16, 17.

brought her back to Lesbos and placed her among the Amazons. A recognizable social context, itself a purveyor of labels, has been replaced in *Le corps lesbien* by a stylized decor composed of conglomerate elements of the Sappho and Amazon legends: islands, a beach, the sea, the color violet, strong female bodies, uniquely female names. This hymn to the lesbian body is also a hymn to the body from Lesbos who is not only lover, writer, muse, but potent goddess, the central figure of a new mythology. There would seem to be little doubt that for Monique Wittig, who has the passion of the true believer, lesbianism is a cause, the only conceivable rallying point for the elaboration of a woman's culture. As an ideology on which to impose a fiction, the possibilities as well as the risks of lesbianism are enormous. Monique Wittig has chosen, in this text, to use lesbianism as a means of destroying the accepted male love discourse as well as the accepted male literary stereotypes about the female body. The destruction begins with the "farewells" of the first sentence and continues through reiterated parodies of sacred literary texts to the torturing, beating, flaying, peeling, devouring, vomiting, and caressing of female flesh. The physical exchange between J/e and Tu is reminiscent at times of a *pas de deux*, at times of a boxing match, at times of a surgical operation. But destruction of one order of language and sensibility implies creation of a new order. The J/e of *Le corps lesbien* is the most powerful lesbian in literature because as a lesbian-feminist she reexamines and redesigns the universe. Starting with the female body she recreates through anecdote and proper names a new aqueous female space and a new female time in which the past is abolished. She is, in fact, the only true anti-Christ, the willful assassin of Christian love.

Provocation exists at every level of the text: in the monotony of the lists, in the female endings attached to masculine proper nouns, in the typography, and in the verbal violence. J/e names the hitherto unnamed. The desperate desire for impossible union is described through the trajectories traced by fingers, hands, tongue outside and inside the body. The female body, whose every part is enumerated, destroyed, and reassembled is the alpha and omega of Wittig's fiction. In the beginning is the

body and at the end; an indestructible body, singular in the text, but signifying the potentiality of all female bodies.

No one since Sappho herself has made a greater contribution to lesbian intertextuality than Monique Wittig. Not only has she restructured elements of the Sappho model, eliminating the enclosed spaces of school or convent, cellar restaurant or alcove, but she has transformed the image of Sappho by associating Sappho's verbal power with the physical power of the Amazons. Wittig has abandoned any attempt to insert Sappho into male culture. *Le corps lesbien* is a textual and cultural gamble. It is a courageous aspiration toward the creation of a linguistic behavior that would, by its very existence, prepare the way for the undomestication of women. Whatever the ultimate fate of the book and the revolution it solicits, it does herald the second coming of Sappho.

Because the corpus of texts that contain the Sappho model is small, any major alteration in the angle of vision transforms the entire body, illuminating forgotten fragments, suggesting new correspondences. The poems and stories of Renée Vivien, for example, begin to emerge from almost complete oblivion under the new lighting. Instead of dismissing them as poor imitations of the Baudelairean lyric or as examples of the inferior "feminine" writing of the *belle époque*, we can now see them as interesting attempts by a lesbian to write as a lesbian about lesbianism. As our awareness of the Sappho model grows, a writer such as Renée Vivien takes her place within a canon that has been until this century an exclusively male creation. Perhaps the most tenacious and pernicious element in this creation, reiterated by almost every writer, female and male, with the exception of Monique Wittig, is that lesbianism implies a nostalgic regression to the mother-daughter couple and is therefore not viable. A text such as *Le corps lesbien* is not concerned with psychological causality. Lesbian intertextuality will never be the same.

