



Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette (1873–1954)
by Roger Viollet (Branger/Roger-Viollet/Belga Image)

The Appearance of a Court Column: Colette and the Famous Murder Trials of the Early Twentieth Century

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Abstract: In Colette’s long career as a journalist, “les affaires criminelles sont comme un fil rouge” (“criminal affairs are a common theme”) Frédéric Maget notes, from the Bonnot Gang; to the parricidal Violette Nozière; to Landru, the famous serial killer of women. Because her name drew readers, she was often asked to cover sensational trials for prominent papers such as *L’Intransigeant* or *Le Matin*. Attending hearings, she was not a “judicial columnist” like her specialized fellow reporters. Therefore, the expression, “*chronique d’allure judiciaire*,” borrowed from Josette Rico, would better suit these journalistic texts. Colette tended to favor a literary quality in her “columns” by keeping the event at a distance, or even ignoring the specific “judicial” frame. Indeed, as a literary journalist Colette used three types of discrepancies. First, poetic: Colette knew the codes for such articles, but she deviated from them. Second, ethical: she took stances that went against general opinion and chose to show an unbiased perspective on what was usually accepted. Third, stylistic: in her radical detachment from the rigorous and cold observation usually expected in such context, without breaking away from one of the main objectives of such articles, she let readers (absent from the courts and debates) see those standing in disgrace—and maybe understand them better.

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In the long journalistic career of the writer Colette, “criminal cases are like a red thread, from the arrest of the Bonnot Gang [in 1912 in *Le Matin*] to the trial of Moulay Hassen [covered in 1938 for *Paris-Soir*] via the trials of Landru [in 1921, *Le Matin*] and of Violette Nozière [in 1933 in *L’Intransigeant*].”¹ But her presence in court does not necessarily make her a “court columnist.” Thus, even if Henri Vonoven, in a talk given in 1924 to young trainee journalists, cites her as an example to be followed for her portrayals of the accused,² and even if Germaine Beaumont makes of her a “model of that difficult genre” thanks to her “wonderful ability to grasp, in a human being, what escaped other observers,”³ the expression “*chronique d’allure judiciaire*”⁴ (the appearance of a court column), borrowed from Josette Rico, would seem to better describe these texts. In this expression we can detect Colette’s tendency to favor the writing of a “column” while at the same time keeping the event at a certain distance, or even neglecting the particular legal context. Indeed, although focused on contemporary criminal cases, since these articles fit in the media dissemination synonymous with the coverage of a major trial, the writer-journalist’s treatment of these events is characterized by a distinct approach—poetic, ethical, or stylistic—a deliberate decision to cast a different gaze on what is generally a matter of consensus.

The “Star” of the Media Dissemination

Since the end of the nineteenth century, writers were “courted for their reputation and the number of readers that their name can draw”⁵: thus on October 10, 1934, the day the trial of Violette Nozière opened, a nineteen-year-old who poisoned her father and nearly murdered her mother, *L’Intransigeant* announced in a box in the center of its front page: “the trial seen . . . on Thursday by Colette.” Calling on a famous author is an important selling point for the newspaper. Likewise, Colette had just joined the newspaper *Paris-Soir* in June 1938 when she was tasked with covering the major trial of Oum el Hassen, the cruel and murderous Madam, scheduled for November in Fez in Morocco. Accordingly, on November 13, an announcement was placed on the front page for the upcoming article, with a photo not of the case, but of the writer assigned to cover it.

Another recurrent way of highlighting these articles written by writer-journalists was to publish them on the front page, while the legal account of the trial was relegated to pages three through seven. These articles preceded the trial dictation taken by the stenographer, complementing and even enriching it. This is how Maurice Goudeké explained the division of labor within the newspaper *Paris-Soir* during the case in Fez. He took charge of the technical part of the account, and left the subjective part to Colette: “Colette

would give her impression of the hearing, while I would give the technical account of the proceedings.”⁶ The news item is thus overshadowed by the writer-journalist’s article.

It is more the layout of the newspaper than the contents of the article itself that would make it “the *appearance* of a court column,” with its headline in bold, its quotes extracted and showcased at the start of the article, its photographs captioned, or its drawings of the proceedings included. For the trial in Fez, the publication on page four with the account by Goudeké further heightened the proximity. Indeed, the place, date, and technical means—“Fez, November 15 (by wire)” —as well as the mention “from our special correspondent” that precede the article bring it even closer to traditional court reporting or to reportage. Lastly, Colette’s text is, like that of her companion, divided into small paragraphs by subtitles that were most likely added by the editor, a method often used in accounts of court proceedings to facilitate reading.

Yet Colette sometimes seems more inclined to “mimic” her fellow reporters than adhere to their practices, as in her first case in Tours in 1912, the Guillotin case, about which she describes with a certain distance her entrance in the court in the midst of the legal press: “I was expecting more gravity among those present. These gentlemen from the legal press, fulfilled, overflowing with joviality, take pleasure in making sardonic forecasts. . . . I am won over by the blasé fickleness of my companions.” Just as she adopts the casual attitude of “these gentlemen,” so too does she seem to copy the structure of her article on the usual framework of the column, showing how fully aware she was of the journalistic genre in which she was here proving herself.

On the other hand, from the Guillotin trial onward, a radically different perspective on the case is to be noted. Colette denounces the meanness of some accounts and of the debate revolving around the issue of “whether they were lovers,”⁷ a key question that was widely covered in the other accounts. Colette then seems to respond directly to her colleagues: “I am embarrassed, disgusted. These base anecdotes about pierced walls, lifted curtains, lost hairpins, this syndicate of spying, of malicious gossip, perhaps of calumny, end up being revolting.”⁸ This decision to take a different approach that reveals itself in the dialogic dimension of the article recurs in all the trials she covered.

Away from the Media Hype

This distinction is therefore notable with regard to the journalistic genre that is the court column, to the media treatment generally reserved for

famous trials,⁹ and lastly to the dominant viewpoint cast on the accused. Concerning the journalistic genre, several codes are not respected: to the usually long articles, which were meant “to be continued,” so as to serialize the information, Colette opposes short, often one-shot columns, and does not introduce cliffhangers when several articles follow one another. For the Landru trial, in 1921, while *Le Matin* serialized the trial, which lasted from November 7 to 30, on its front page, only one report, dated November 8, was signed by Colette.

Likewise, the scoop is of secondary importance. Published on Saturday, October 13, 1933, the day after the verdict, her column on Violette Nozière does not take into account the death sentence although all the rival newspapers describe this fateful moment, a prerequisite of the legal article, with its string of stereotypes. Yet this tension inherent to any legal procedure is lacking from Colette’s account, which has only “the *appearance* of a court column.” While the court column strives to adhere to the time of the proceedings, notably through the use of deictic words or expressions, strangely Colette’s article is almost disconnected, atemporal.

Moreover, contrary to the topical mediatization of the murder trials, Colette refrains from calling excessively on pathos and sensationalism. The case of Violette Nozière is quite illustrative. During the three days of the trial, highlights are systematically pointed out and emphasized in the rival press, such as with the “pathetic confrontation between daughter and mother,”¹⁰ who forgives her on the witness stand, or the rage of the parricide when she received her sentence.

With Colette, by contrast, one notes her perfect indifference to these courtroom incidents and other highlights of the judicial ceremony, which the press are generally all too happy to exploit to attract readers, even when there is almost nothing to relate. Even if it features headlines and sensationalist titles, this column thus remains impermeable to the posturing that runs through other cases. The headlines that dominate her columns were written by editors, not by the author. For instance, “Here comes Landru!” which announces the long-awaited entrance of the serial killer in the courtroom, is a phrase extracted from Colette’s account. Likewise, for the Guillotin and Oum el Hassen cases, the stereotypical dimension of the headlines—“The Epilogue of a Major Tragedy” and “The Ogress of Fez Before the Jury”—seems to indicate them as exogenous to the column. Colette does not retain them when the columns are compiled in *Prisons et paradis* (Prisons and Paradise)¹¹ (1932), and *Journal à rebours* (Counter-journal).¹²

Lastly, in rewriting the column on Oum el Hassen, Colette seems to combine her disdain for the media hype with the haughty attitude of the ac-

cused, by lending the latter her voice:

As for the aghast chorus of barely pubescent courtesans, it is hardly murmuring, it is groaning so quietly, prostrate. . . . One of them makes the most of her convulsive horror. At the sight of Oum el Hassen, she screams, throws herself into the arms of the Arab interpreter, tries to reach the exit of the courtroom. . . . How disdainful the gaze of Oum el Hassen on the terror-stricken woman! A purely mundane contempt, Muslim haughtiness too. Are prostitutes no longer taught to be quiet in public?¹³

While the scene could be a source of pathos, Colette adopts the merciless point of view of the accused, not that of the victims, to denounce the masquerade.

As can be seen from this example, the gaze cast on the case, and in particular on the accused, is often radically opposed not only to the media *doxa*, but also to the crowd that surrounded the journalist at the proceedings. As though the singularity of the gaze cast on the criminal was the only possible reflection of this being isolated on the bench of infamy, Colette tries to stand out from her fellow journalists or from the public that surrounds her, and more particularly from the female public—from which she dissociates herself by demonstrating incredible misogyny—even at the expense of inciting a scandal. And so while the onlooker does not hide his hostility, his aversion to Mrs. Guillotin, her column is entitled “How Strong Woman Is!” showing admiration for the strength of character of the woman everyone shunned. Although the court column helps to establish certain legends and the myth around criminals,¹⁴ Colette seems to deconstruct the prefabricated media image newspapers impose. Violette Nozière, a surrealist icon,¹⁵ was at the center of a famous affair in the 1930s, in which “parricide and incest are interwoven, that is, the transgression of two fundamental taboos.”¹⁶ Colette, by contrast, finds her “more stubborn than mysterious” in her article in *L’Intransigeant*, which begins with the anaphora “*c’est du petit monde*,” and which shows a colorless and mediocre person, a sordid affair, which has nothing to do with “ancient tragedy”¹⁷ or any other hyperbolic comparison written at the time by fellow reporters.

The way Colette expresses herself in these court columns tends to align them closer to the daily columns she wrote throughout her long journalistic career rather than standard court reporting. Indeed, although these are current events, it seems that the author rejects in part the corresponding writing of current events. Although she does not deny the exceptionality of these criminals, she draws their portraits in a personal manner, not far removed from the “everyday lyricism”¹⁸ or “myopic journalism”¹⁹ evoked by Marie-Ève Thérénty.

Colette and “Her” Monsters

Colette’s iconoclastic worldview, observed in her war reportage among other places, seems to apply to her court columns. Juxtaposed to and contrasting with the broad “vagueness” that surrounds everything that relates to the facts or to the judicial context (thereby contrasting with the bill of indictment or the stenographic report) is the practice of the “close-up,” a “description from up close”²⁰ that serves the portrait of the accused. Fixed on the latter, the acuity of Colette’s gaze helps isolate the observer and the observed from the rest of the assembly, as though they alone were left. This concentration enables the journalist, thanks to the precision of the physical details, to draw the personalized physiognomy of the criminals, but also to try to penetrate their thoughts to better understand them.

During the Landru trial, for example, columnists and illustrators tracked the slightest movement, and insisted heavily on the “impassive,” “calm,” “steady” appearance of this “correct *petit bourgeois*”²¹ accused of having killed eleven fiancées in cold blood to get his hands on their savings. Yet to account for this impression, Colette pauses and describes in detail a tiny gesture which she renders significant: “*Il se mouche posément, /plie son mouchoir en carré, /rabat le petit volet /de sa poche extérieure. Qu’il est soigneux!*” (He blows his nose calmly, folds his tissue, turns down the flap of his exterior pocket. How tidy he is!).²² Through the balanced rhythm and the play on sounds, it is Landru’s entire personality, underlined by the exclamation mark, which the reader sees, hears, and feels, thanks to this simple sentence.

However, to achieve this psychological portrait, Colette also draws on the accused’s past, also by means of small touches, “[isolating] details, anecdotes and without any recontextualization,” “turning these things which were seized on the spot into facts to be interpreted in a general context which always remains vague.”²³ While the media machine dehumanized the accused and turned them into monsters, Colette applies herself to re-immersing them in a human, almost banal everydayness, pausing at one or other detail, perhaps in an attempt to grasp what led them to commit an extraordinary act. The column then becomes largely fictionalized in the recreation of this past, which rests only remotely on the case file. For instance, she portrays Violette Nozière as dying of boredom in the “awful, narrow quarter,” “in which, at night, one unfolds, beside a double bed, a small bed, which is folded up in the morning,” surrounded by a father “devoid of genius” and a mother “who sewed and did not read.” Colette elaborates the vision of a miserable life, which could appear as being at the source of the parricide.

In the case of Landru, it is the act itself that Colette imagines, based on her observation in court:

*Did he kill? If he did kill, I would swear that it is with this meticulous, somewhat maniacal, admirably lucid care with which he classifies his notes, drafts his papers. Did he kill? Then it is while whistling a little tune, and wearing an apron for fear of stains. . . . We remain stunned in front of the tranquil and gentle murderer, who keeps a diary of his victims and rested, perhaps, while at work, with his elbow on the window and feeding the birds some bread.*²⁴

In this shift from the hearing to Landru’s presumed past, Colette ends up advancing an increasingly clear picture of the crime, bringing together the two antithetical factors that made this case famous: on the one hand, the normality of the accused, and on the other the barbarity and baseness of his crimes. From the meticulousness that he demonstrates during the hearing, she thus passes to everyday gestures that could correspond to his behavior: whistling, wearing an apron so as to avoid stains, feeding the birds some bread. The contrast created is powerful precisely because it is the description of a murder. First using the conditional to make an assumption, “I would swear,” the tone asserts itself after the anaphora “did he kill?” thanks to the introductory “it is” before concluding with the oxymoric vision of “the tranquil and gentle murderer.”

Through her lyricism, Colette ends up transfiguring these media monsters in order to integrate them into her own portrait gallery. Far from being isolated from the rest of her journalistic output, the court columns are republished, alongside others, in various heterogeneous collections, sometimes undergoing changes. Notably it is in the use of metaphor that the writer constructs “her” monsters, as here in the final, revised vision of Oum el Hassen, after the verdict: “Her immaculate veils rise little by little, cover the top of her cheeks, the eyebrows. . . . Through the teguments of the cocoon she is weaving, thus transpired the last movements of the larva, still showing some life before its long hypnosis.”²⁵

This extended metaphor is not in the original November 17 article, even though it appears implicitly throughout the three columns: the first, influenced by Orientalist biases, already evokes the veils of women and the harem. On the second day, the first description of Oum el Hassen begins as follows: “If I lean to the right, I almost brush against the light silks, the starched and immaculate muslins that make up the costume of the accused; from head to toe, she is white, freshly ironed.” Already her clothes, by synecdoche, constitute for her a second skin of sorts, a protection that only shows the top of her face. On the day of the verdict, Colette writes: “At midnight we will be in the Courts, around a woman in white who, as the verdict comes nearer, closes all her Muslim veils, raises to her eyes her immaculate muslin, . . . only shows her made-up eyes whose gaze gives into no gaze.”²⁶

It is this attitude of withdrawal, which is also present in the account of her companion, that would inspire the final, almost Kafkaesque metaphor to Colette, of the “larva” in its cocoon, present in *Journal à rebours*. “Unlike journalism, [the writer] is not held to the facts. He has his own legitimacy, the certainty that his gaze is enough. While the journalist advances the truth of fact and his objectivity, the writer lays claim to a subjectivity, an unexpected viewpoint.”²⁷ It is in these terms that Frédéric Maget describes “the writer’s privilege.” Colette, “the writer who sometimes acted as a court columnist,”²⁸ as her daughter put it, takes part in the media dissemination around the trials by delivering her court impressions. Thanks to the newspaper’s layout, her column does take on the “appearance of a court column.”²⁹ However, while playing with the codes of the genre and casting a lucid gaze on the mediatization of these famous trials, in no way does she sacrifice her original and independent perspective on the world.

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Notes

1. Colette, *Colette journaliste: chroniques et reportages, 1893–1955*, eds. Gérard Bonal and Frédéric Maget (Paris: Seuil, 2010).
2. Henri Vonoven, *La Belle Affaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1925), 29.
3. Germaine Beaumont, “Colette journaliste,” *Prestige français et Mondanités* 14 (March 1956).
4. Josette Rico, *Colette ou le désir entravé* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2004), 45.
5. Frédéric Maget (coauthor of *Colette journaliste*, *ibid.*), site Présence de la littérature: Dossier Colette, SCÉRÉN-CNDP, 2010, 2. <https://www.reseau-canope.fr/presence-litterature/dossiers-auteurs/colette/colette-un-certain-regard.html>.
6. Maurice Goudek, *Près de Colette* (Paris: Flammarion, 1956).
7. The accused, Paul Houssardet, killed Monsieur Guillotin out of jealousy. Although he was probably Mrs. Guillotin’s lover, he categorically denied their affair

during the case to save his mistress from being accused of complicity.

8. Colette, “Que c’est solide une femme!,” *Le Matin*, June 27, 1912, 1.
9. For the elements concerning the poetics of the court column, see my doctoral thesis, written under the supervision of Marie-Ève Thérénty. Amélie Chabrier, “Les Genres du prétoire, chronique judiciaire et littérature au XIX^e siècle” (PhD diss., Université de Montpellier III, 2013).
10. “Pathétique confrontation dans le prétoire de la mère et de la fille,” *Le Matin*, October 12, 1934, 1, 7.
11. Colette, *Prisons et paradis* (Paris: Ferenczi, 1932).
12. Colette, *Journal à rebours* (Paris: Fayard, 1941).
13. *Ibid.*, 101.
14. Myriam Boucharenc, “Barbe-Bleue aux assises ou la chronique judiciaire en procès,” in *La Chronique des écrivains (1880–2000)*, eds. A. Schaffner and B. Curatolo (Dijon: Éditions universitaires de Dijon, 2010), 36. In this article, Boucharenc shows how the media construct the legendary figure of Landru, evoking the “immediate recycling of the real in the literary category,” giving “an image to the criminal, a fantasmagorical richness to the character.”
15. Anne-Emmanuelle Demartini, “L’Affaire Nozière entre instruction judiciaire et médiatisation,” *Le Temps des médias*, 15 (September 2010): 126–141.
16. Anne-Emmanuelle Demartini, “L’Affaire Nozière. La parole sur l’inceste et sa réception sociale dans la France des années 1930,” *Revue d’histoire moderne et contemporaine* 56:4 (October–December 2009): 190–214.
17. Colette, “Je demande un verdict terrible: la peine capitale’ . . . dit l’avocat général,” *L’Intransigeant*, October 13, 1934, 1. See for example Pierre Lamblin, “Les jurys décident, ce soir, du sort de Violette Nozière,” *L’Intransigeant*, October 13, 1934, 7.
18. Marie-Ève Thérénty, “Le Lyrisme du quotidien,” *Cahiers de L’Herne*, no. 97 (2011), 135.
19. The expression is borrowed from André Billy, *L’Œuvre* (January 27, 1918).
20. Thérénty, “Le Lyrisme du quotidien,” 135.
21. Quotations taken from *Le Matin*, and *Le Petit Parisien* at the moment of the Landru trial, November 1921.
22. Elisabeth Gilet, “Colette chroniqueuse judiciaire,” *Cahiers Colette*, no. 23 (2001), 131–156, 138.
23. Thérénty, “Le Lyrisme du quotidien,” 135.
24. Colette, “Voici Landru!” *Le Matin*, November 8, 1921, 1–2. My emphasis.
25. Colette, *Journal à rebours*, 105.
26. Colette, articles dated November 15, 16, 17, 1938, at the trial of Oum El Hassen, for *Paris-Soir*.
27. Frédéric Maget, *Colette journaliste*, <https://www.reseau-canope.fr/presence-litterature/dossiers-auteurs/colette/colette-un-certain-regard.html>.
28. Colette de Jouvenel, Preface to “Coupables,” *Marie-Claire*, no. 103 (May 1963), 1–16.
29. Rico, *Colette ou le désir entravé*, 45.