

New Woman with Old Feelings?

Contrasting Kollontai's and Colette's Writings on Love

Anna Rotkirch

In her famous essay “The New Woman,” Russian socialist revolutionary Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1952) describes an ongoing transformation of the feminine psyche.¹ The new, liberated woman faces obstacles not only from a hostile social order and possessive men, but also from her innermost self. As Kollontai puts it, “The power of past centuries still weighs heavily even upon the soul of the new, free woman. Atavistic feelings interrupt and weaken the new experiences, outlived conceptions hold the feminine mind thrusting towards freedom in their clutches.”²

Kollontai wrote in a socialist utopian tradition that envisaged a profound change of the human condition. The outlived conceptions were “still” present, but on their way to the museum of antiquated psychological responses. However, Kollontai did not postulate any mechanical causal relation between modes of production and psychic habits. Capitalism and industrialism had created the lifestyle of the professionally independent woman, but did not by themselves transform her ways of loving. Indeed, Kollontai's main interest in this essay lay in analyzing the new female “psychological type” as a complex and socially influential force in its own right. In this analysis, she appeared to agree with a statement made in *The Vagabond* by French author Colette (1873-1953)—“you have no worse enemy than yourself!”—the enemy in question being female heterosexual desire and love.³

The Vagabond is one of the works Kollontai often returned to in her portrait of the New Woman. Her essay repeats Colette's warning about the “worst enemy” throughout—at the beginning, when the heroine, Renée, has left a humiliating marriage with her first great love and become a self-supporting artist, and at the end, when she abandons her new love and the prospect of

a cozy and prestigious marriage in order to continue her life as a free, dancing, and writing vagabond. The tension between self-realization and dependency, so central to Colette, obviously resonated with Kollontai's sexual politics. However, Kollontai also read her French contemporary selectively and occasionally approached the problem of desire from quite different angles. In this article, I will look more closely at the concepts of feelings, corporeality, and pleasure in these women's texts. My point of departure is Kollontai's direct references to Colette in "The New Woman." I will additionally quote some of Kollontai's political essays, paying much less attention to her fiction. In addition to *The Vagabond*, Colette will here mainly be heard through *The Pure and the Impure* as this work represents a kind of summary of her views on pleasure.⁴ Thus, I will not compare Kollontai's whole *oeuvre* with Colette's: instead, the aim is to contrast their ways of conceptualizing love by looking at how they textually comment on and interlace with each other.

Literary Genealogies of Feminist Thought

This is how Kollontai describes the heroine of *The Vagabond*, Renée:

The music hall artiste glides by, dodging the sharp stones, with her finesse of soul that enchants our eyes, as though she was formed out of soft aquarelle tones. She has left her husband with her illusions shattered, a wounded heart; she has thrown down the gauntlet to the world to which she belonged. . . . Freedom, independence, solitude are the substance of her personal desires. But when Renée, after a tiring long day's work, sits at the fireplace in her lonely flat, it is as though the unseeing melancholy of loneliness creeps into her room and sets itself behind her chair. "I am used to being alone," she writes in her diary, "but today I feel so forsaken. Am I then not independent, not free? And terribly—lonely?" Does not this lament have the ring of the woman of the past who is used to hearing familiar, beloved voices, to feel somebody's habitual caresses?⁵

Kollontai's use of Colette and other contemporary authors is an excellent example of the literary genealogies of feminist thought. As Claudia Lindén has stressed with regard to Swedish author Ellen Key, philosophical and political questions of feminine desire, sexuality, and love have often been most clearly articulated in literature. Compared with Western institutional philosophy, literature has traditionally been more open to women as authors and an effective means of reaching other women. The novel is also an ideal genre for enacting alternative futures. As Lindén expresses it, "Literature is a medium in which sexual difference can be analyzed and restructured. . . . It could expose and ridicule patriarchal culture and its double morality. But first and foremost, it is a place for dreaming up new life forms, new men and new women."⁶

At the time when Kollontai and Colette dreamed up their new women, literary fiction was a major path of feminist thought. The feminism of fiction was sometimes opposed to that of the organized women's movement, especially concerning sexual liberation and experimentation. When tracing the genealogies of contemporary feminism, we should therefore pay attention to both institutionalized and artistic expressions. Colette is an excellent example of the latter, although she did not consider herself a feminist, while Kollontai, who alternated between political texts and fiction, illustrates how the different strands of feminism supported each other.⁷

The contemporary legacy of both Kollontai and Colette is uneven and ambivalent. After the early 1920s, Kollontai mostly expressed her opinions through the genre of popular fiction. Her essays, autobiography, and short stories were (re)published in several Western countries in the 1970s and influenced the second wave of leftist feminism.⁸ However, her socialist visions are not very fashionable today, and she remains little known and belittled in contemporary Russia. We lack a profound assessment of Kollontai's life and thoughts, especially concerning the last decades of her life. Kollontai wrote her memoirs back in Moscow in the 1950s, but they have to my knowledge still not been published.

Colette, by contrast, was never a politician, but a writer of fiction and journalism who perceived herself as apolitical and antifeminist. This has, of course, not prevented scholars from analyzing her approaches to gender and sexuality,⁹ but it is only recently that Colette is being rediscovered, most prominently by Judith Thurman and Julia Kristeva, as a writer whose biography and oeuvre is of direct relevance to feminist concerns.¹⁰ *The Vagabond* was recently republished in Swedish and English. Through these new biographies and translations, Colette is presented as someone whose views on corporeality, homosexuality, and complex, queer gender identities appeal to the postmodern aesthetic.¹¹ At the same time, she provides unconventional and piercing insights into the logic of mainstream heterosexual passion. Neither do her views conform to the social constructionism and/or cultural relativism that dominate much of contemporary social and cultural studies.

Below, I will argue that while Kollontai and Colette share an uneasiness regarding “old” and problematic feelings, their views diverge in regard to the substance and future of those feelings. Kollontai is confident about what these problematic feelings are and stresses the importance of overcoming them. Colette, by contrast, does not believe in discarding “the senses” and is much less sure about what they actually represent.

Kollontai's New Species

In “The New Woman,” Kollontai focuses on the role of literature in reflecting and envisaging the lives of women. She testifies to the birth of a female subject, a woman gradually transformed “from the *object* of tragedy of the male soul into the *subject* of an independent tragedy.”¹² The new woman is ontologically single because she is professionally and emotionally independent, no longer defined through her relation to a man:

[I]t is a wholly new . . . type of heroine, hitherto unknown, heroines with independent demands on life, heroines who assert their personality, heroines who protest against the universal servitude of woman in the State, the family, society, who fight for their rights as representatives of their sex. “Single women”—that is how this type is increasingly often defined. “Die junggesellinen” . . . In the most recent past the main feminine type was the “spouse,” the woman as a resonator, a supplement, an appendage. The single woman is least of all a “resonator,” she has ceased to be a simple reflex of the man. She has a singular, inner world, full of general human interests, she is independent inwardly and self-reliant outwardly. . .¹³

Kollontai’s new woman is defined by three characteristics. She is no longer formed and governed through her feelings only, be they desire, adoration, or jealousy. She makes high demands on her male partner(s), who have to learn to respect her inner freedom and her work. Even a married woman can be “single” if she thinks and travels independently. Finally, the new woman enjoys the “earthly joys,” that is, she is sexually active and proud of it.

Kollontai wants to analyze this new psychological type within a Marxist framework of changing modes of production. She argues that for the first time, woman has “broken the rusted fetter of her sex” and has become a “personality,” a “human being.” Kollontai occasionally appears to equate history with its literary representations and both with bourgeois femininity. Thus, the “eternal feminine” is defined as “engaging feminine submissiveness and softness of yore,” “passivity, devotion, submissiveness, gentleness,” and a habit of according the husband primacy in life.¹⁴ Rarely does this essay allude to the vast literary and historical heritage—from, among others, George Sand—which indicates that women have insisted on independence and inner freedom before the nineteenth century. Kollontai mostly ignores all the peasant and artisan women who worked before the industrial revolution. She underscores that although independent women existed

before, it is only with the spread of female paid work that the new woman became possible as a social type.¹⁵

Kollontai's notion of the independent woman is heavily influenced by the philosophical and psychological views of Swedish author Ellen Key and Austrian author Grete Meisel-Hess, among others. Kollontai does not apply any specific psychological framework, except for some either historical or metaphorical use of Darwin's theory of evolution. Thus, the New Woman is compared to a "new species,"¹⁶ and Kollontai appropriates Darwin's concept of natural selection to underscore her vision of a radical break with the past: "only the stronger, more resistant disciplined natures arrive in the ranks of those 'earning their livelihood'" while, presumably, the old, submissive and sensitive female "species" dies away.¹⁷

Interestingly, Kollontai's perception of a historically and psycho-biologically transforming femininity is mainly related to personal self-esteem and romantic love. She usually understands the "feminine" to be a passive and weaker version of masculine/human psychology in a way typical of early twentieth-century thought. With regards to physical desire and motherhood, however, she traces a surprisingly unproblematic continuation with the evolutionary past:

The rebellion of women against a one-sided sexual morality is one of the most sharply delineated traits of the new heroine. This is easy to understand. In the life of women—the bearers of the future, mothers—physiology . . . plays an incomparably greater role than with men. Freedom of feeling, freedom in the choice of the beloved, of the possible father of "her" child. . . . Contemporary heroines become mothers without being married.¹⁸

In this bold reversal of Freud's thesis of a hydraulic, stronger masculine sex drive, Kollontai first claims that physiology is *more* important to women than to men and then that free motherhood is directly connected to free female choice of sexual partners.¹⁹ Elsewhere, she approvingly describes the possibility of maternity now becoming "an aim in itself," distinct from the mother's

relations to the child's father.²⁰ (In this essay and elsewhere, Kollontai only addresses fatherhood in passing as an option interested men could engage in for educational purposes.) With regards to intercourse and motherhood, old feelings and new times combine in overthrowing bourgeois hypocrisy and seemingly without any major obstacles.

The threat of femininity is thus not that of physiology or of motherhood, but that of a woman who emotionally defines herself through a man, who has a "feminine self" rather than a "human self."²¹ The New Woman should have it the other way around, being first of all human and occasionally feminine. She can willingly let herself be "overwhelmed by the waves of passion," or she can dress nicely, but she always knows that love is "only a stage, only a brief respite on life's path."²² Self-discipline and higher goals in life help the New Woman enjoy love without succumbing to feelings of dependence or jealousy. However, although Kollontai tries hard to separate the old women from the new, their difference is repeated *within* the New Woman herself:

The old and the new struggle in the souls of women, in permanent enmity.

Contemporary heroines, therefore, must wage a struggle on two fronts: with the external world and with the inclinations of their grandmothers dwelling in the recesses of their beings. . . . The transformation of the feminine psyche, which is adjusted to the new conditions of its economic and social existence, will not be achieved without a strong, dramatic self-overcoming.²³

Kollontai's fiction nourishes itself on this demand for "dramatic self-overcoming," for instance, as her most famous heroine, Vasilisa Malygina in *Red Love*, finds the strength to leave a rich, unfaithful, and politically dubious husband whom she loves and by whom she is pregnant.²⁴ For obvious reasons, this ambivalence is absent from the political pamphlets such as *Communist Morality in the Sphere of Marital Relations*, which Kollontai wrote at the height of her Soviet political career. In this text, everything is designed to show that the sexual relations between comrades are a central part of the class question and that excessive personal dependency can be

eradicated from Communist life. Kollontai even warns that sex based on intellectual curiosity is wrong:

The sexual act must be seen not as something shameful and sinful but as something which is as natural as the other needs of healthy organism, such as hunger and thirst. Such phenomena cannot be judged as moral or immoral. The satisfaction of healthy and natural instincts only ceases to be normal when the boundaries of hygiene are overstepped. . . . Communist morality, therefore, while openly recognizing the normality of sexual interests, condemns unhealthy and unnatural interest in sex (excesses, for example, or sexual relations before maturity has been reached, which exhaust the organism and lower the capacity of men and women for work). . . . Thus both early sexual experience (before the body has developed and grown strong) and sexual restraint must be seen as equally harmful.²⁵

Eric Naiman has argued that Kollontai's ideal new woman represents a kind of revolutionary anorexia. He claims that Kollontai's attempts to create a full, female yet human being inadvertently succumbs to a grotesque fascination and repugnance vis-à-vis corporeality and sexuality. Naiman shows how Kollontai's female protagonists—his main example is Vasilisa Malygina—lack sensual bodies. Vasilisa is all eyes and soul, while the bourgeois-style mistress in the novel has a voluptuous body and strong sex appeal.²⁶

However, was Kollontai really afraid of the body? And if so, what do we mean by this scary “body”? Is it the body that is sexually aroused and has intercourse? Or is it the walking, sleeping, working, or crying body? Naiman's psychoanalytic glasses make him focus on the body mainly as a site of sexual desire. Kollontai's view, as we have seen, is closer to the Darwinian in that sexual passion is one of many bodily expressions, but not necessarily the defining one in every situation. We may agree with Naiman that sexual lust is often represented in gloomy and threatening ways in

Kollontai's fiction. However, this is not to say that all aspects of sexuality and corporeality are as problematic in her world.

It seems that Naiman's important insight into the rhetorical traps of Soviet fiction in the 1920s misses Kollontai's weakest spot. As we have seen, the problem for her is not really with the body in its physiological dimension, including sexual intercourse. Vasilisa Malygina is depicted with bodily sensations and sexual feelings and her experience of premarital sex is rendered in an approving but realistic way. Kollontai actually succeeds in describing Vasilisa's "first time" in a neutral, matter-of-fact way, which is very unusual for Russian literature and culture at the time (and will remain so throughout the rest of the twentieth century). Although Kollontai probably never wrote that having intercourse should be as easy as drinking a glass of water (the famous phrase wrongly attributed to her by Lenin and others), she was clearly capable of adopting a pragmatic, no-nonsense view of sex. If her heroine is "anorexic," as Naiman claims, it is not because she cannot eat, have sex, become a mother, or love and desire a man. What the New Woman really denies her soul and her body is the *feeling* of dependency. The main threat symbolized by the other, sensual woman—for example, as she is depicted in *Vasilisa Malygina*—is her dependence on a man, be it sexual, social, or economical.

When Kollontai in her historical lectures longs for the female body itself to become less soft and curvy and more muscular, this was not necessarily because she despises the female body in the same misogynistic way that many male authors have done. Rather, she connects muscular softness and exaggerated sexual attributes with the psychological "old type," the women who were primarily wives, mistresses, or spinsters. She argues that prehistoric women were physiologically less distinct from men than women formed as "females" by more recent societies with private ownership. Accordingly, sexual dimorphism may (and should) again become less visible in a communist society.²⁷

As Kollontai's above quoted vision of a communist morality suggests, the body in its physical, genital, and hormonal dimension appears as a problem soluble by a healthy lifestyle and good common sense. The real threat comes from curiosity, excessive interest, obsession, deprivation, restraint—in other words, it is more a question of emotions than of physiology.

Here, the problematic distinction between old and new feelings resurfaces. As Eva Adolfsson rhetorically asks in her rereading of Kollontai's "New Woman," do deep feelings of loss and solitude have to be signs of some inherited feminine incompetence? What if you manage to find your own voice, but it only wants to speak about the love you have lost?²⁸ In other words, what is "self," what is "I" in the New Woman's overcoming of herself?

"I Have No Equals": Colette on the Senses

The story Colette's Renée tells us in *The Vagabond* is exactly that of a strong, dramatic self-overcoming and it receives Kollontai's whole-hearted approval:

And when passion suddenly invades Renée on her paths, she allows herself to succumb to the advancing waves and to be borne away by them. But passion does not blind her, it does not becloud her analytical mind. "Only my senses are attacked," she establishes with melancholy regret. "Only my senses are intoxicated." Renée sobers up. The new love does not give her what she had been seeking. In the embrace of the beloved she is as lonesome as before. And la Vagabonde flees, she fades from her love, she flees because this love is so unlike the refined demands she makes on love.²⁹

We find clear sympathy and recognition in this passage. By this time, Kollontai was herself traveling all over Europe as a political vagabond, appearing at socialist conferences and leaving behind lovers who challenged her career. Both women were, in fiction and in their own lives,

enacting the lives of women who have no husbands or better halves, but co-travelers, *compagnons de route*, as Colette puts it.³⁰ However, Kollontai's brief rendering also highlights some aspects where her views and her interpretation of Renée's choices differ from those of Colette. Kollontai writes that Renée is disappointed because her new affair "does not give her what she is seeking" and is so unlike "the refined demands she makes on love." Actually, the dramatic force in Renée's decision to break up comes precisely because this love in many ways *does* give her what she is seeking. She is not at all "lonesome" in her lover's embraces, but, on the contrary, passionately in love, energized, happy, and trusting. It is even indicated that this man could provide the security and comfort that "the abandoned child that trembles inside" Renée has been longing for, at least since the maltreatment and infidelity of her husband and probably ever since childhood.³¹ Only when Renée is separated from her lover does she become aware of those traits of his that did not conform to her sensibilities and lifestyle in the first place, that is, before she fell in love: he thinks it is self-evident that they will marry and live together, he asks her to stop touring, he does not approve of lesbian women, and he cannot even write eloquent letters! He is probably quite refined in several respects, not least erotically, but he is intellectually her inferior, not to say boring. In the novel's climax, Renée explains why she does not believe in any equality in love: "He is good, he is simple, he adores me . . .? But then he is inferior to me. . . . He arouses me with one glance, and I cease to belong when he puts his mouth on mine? But then he is my enemy, the looter who steals me from myself!"³²

Obviously, Kollontai and Colette both see dependency as the big question mark in a heterosexual relation. At least at the time of writing *The Vagabond*, Colette does not appear to believe in any meaningful relationship without dependence and desire either. Even if the prospective husband would be brilliantly talented, he intends to share his life with her and that is in itself intrusive: "You came to share my life. . . . Share, yes: *take your part!* Be the half of my actions, intrude every hour into the secret temple of my thoughts, right? Why you and not

somebody else? I have closed it to everybody.”³³ The conclusion appears to be that no relationship could be sufficiently free and equal, however refined otherwise.

Another crucial difference is that Kollontai valued and feared emotions, but saw the physical and reproductive side of sexuality as quite trivial while Colette explored the complicated links *between* drives, desire, and emotions.

Unlike Kollontai, Colette had no intention of providing the masses with a new morality. Nevertheless, in *The Pure and the Impure*, the book she started writing in the late 1930s (two decades after *The Vagabond*), she was directly concerned with sexuality, gender, and morality. For example, she criticizes the labeling of homosexuals and juxtaposes it to her own experience of being unhappily married. The “monstrosity” of an unusual sexual orientation appeared attractive compared to a “normal” marriage: “‘If I call you [her male homosexual friends] monsters, then what name can I give to what is inflicted on me as normal? Look there, on the wall, the shadow of that frightful shoulder, the expression of that vast back and the neck swollen with blood . . . O monsters, do not leave me alone. . . .’”³⁴

However, Colette was really not interested in historical progress, but almost exclusively in grasping what Kollontai wished would wither away: dependence, submission, lack of authenticity. The book’s title summarizes Colette’s aim in a typically allusive way. What is “pure” and what is “impure”? How does Colette’s purity relate to the pleasures which figured in the first title of the same book, *Ces plaisirs* . . . (as modified from her own original expression, “these pleasures that we lightly call physical”?)³⁵

In the foreword to the new English edition of *The Pure and the Impure*, Judith Thurman writes that Colette understood purity in a pagan way, which had nothing to do with religious or social morality, usually the contrary: “purity, for Colette, is a prelapsarian state of harmony enjoyed by wild animals, flora, birds of prey, certain sociopaths, and by ordinary humans only as fetuses. To

be pure means to be unhindered by any conscious bonds of need or dependence, or by any conflict between male and female drives.”³⁶

Similarly, Julia Kristeva relates Colette’s notion of impurity especially to heterosexuality while some homosexual relations may come closer to purity.³⁷ What we now refer to as queer sexualities was thus positioned as less bizarre than normative male-female love. Still, the notion of purity itself is most evasive, and Colette did not even aim at any theoretical coherence. Nevertheless, we can say that Colette’s notion of impurity circles around questions of unequal power and dependency. Thus, an eighteenth-century lesbian couple, the Ladies of Llangollen, is imagined as a harmonious, lasting and thus possibly “pure” couple:

a unique sentiment sprang, firm and flowering like the iris backed up by its green lance. . . . Two women much in love do not shun ecstasy, nor a sensuality more scattered than the spasm and more warming. . . . these are the delights of constant presence and habits that engender and excuse fidelity. Marvelously short days, similar to a lamp reflected in a perspective of mirrors! . . . As it happens with perfectly happy people, the younger woman neglects all means of expression and, mute, becomes a smooth shadow. . . She even loses her name, which Lady Eleanor almost never wrote in her “Diary.” From then on she is called “Beloved”, and “Better Half,” and “Delight of my heart” . . .³⁸

On the one hand, Colette depicted lesbian love as an isolated, balanced state; on the other hand, she was most of all interested in the possible price paid for this harmony by the younger and silent woman. At least in this case, purity and tranquil harmony came at the expense of any literary expression and even a proper name.

In the rest of *Pure and Impure*, other relations and addictions are described. One of Colette’s cases is the womanizing man who never commits himself to any woman and whose total *lack* of dependency makes him unable to really enjoy his conquests. He complains that women enjoy him

more than he enjoys them: “Their pleasure was all too real. Their tears, as well. But especially their pleasure. . . .”³⁹ Excessive desire without commitment is not so much condemned as seen as unrewarding. But what if commitment comes without desire? The book opens with a mysterious woman who fakes orgasm in order not to disappoint her young lover. She loves him, she says, but points out that her body is less readily fooled:

But what is the heart, Madame? It is worth less than its reputation. It is quite convenient; it accepts anything. You furnish it with whatever you have; it is not very difficult . . . But the body . . . That’s something else! It has a cultivated taste, as they say; it knows what it wants. A heart doesn’t choose. One always ends up by loving.⁴⁰

The opposition is not between body and soul or, as it is for Kollontai, between emotions and the will, but between emotions and pleasure. Sexual pleasure is seen as a more accurate and sensitive response than the obliging, emotive (although obviously also bodily) heart. A few pages later, Colette’s narrator claims that sexuality in some way governs all the other senses:

The senses? Why not *the* sense? That would be discreet and sufficient. *The sense*: let the five other sub-senses venture far from it and they will be called back with a jerk,—like the light and stinging ribbons, half herbs, half hands, delegated by a submarine creature. . . . Intractable, lordly senses, as ignorant as the princes of bygone days who learned only the indispensable: to dissimulate, to hate, to command . . . who could fix your unstable borders?⁴¹

Without, I hope, sociologizing Colette’s book too much, one could perhaps say that passion, desire, attraction—“*the sense*” that governs our usual senses and that is less easily fooled than the heart—is what moves her protagonists into various impure ways of life. Purity and pleasure are, like poles in a magnetic field, constituted by the force of the sense(s). Yet, in her view, the life course of humans also has more or less disturbing states. The cruel innocence of teenagers and the occasionally achieved calm of old age may more easily allow for “purity” than the impure

submission of the young adult woman.⁴² However, for Colette, there exists no promising future in which lovers would politely meet when they want to and personal happiness would seamlessly be combined with or subdued to professional creativity.

Unlike Kollontai, Colette places less value on “feelings” at least in the usual sense of the word. Emotions are for her inseparable from physiology, as when she comments on the notion “physical jealousy” by asking if there is any jealousy which is not physical?⁴³ She also refuses to reduce the feelings of the body to easily channeled, physiological sensations. The archaic feelings Kollontai saw as embarrassing remnants are in Colette’s texts what makes us human, “heroines of flesh” as distinguished from the pure but infantile world of plants and fetuses.⁴⁴ Kollontai wishes to overcome the female in the woman, while Colette looks this female right into her eyes. Additionally, Colette’s specter of feminine feelings is not only that of submission and weakness, but also of intrigue, intuition, deceit and play; neither are they exclusively heterosexual.

The feeling of jealousy provides the clearest example of these divergences. In Kollontai’s view, jealousy is an unfortunate and demeaning emotion which should not be granted too much importance and which has to eventually disappear from the partnerships of true minds. For Colette, by contrast, jealousy is the only pain “you never get used to,”⁴⁵ a homosexually flavored obsession with the other women of your lover. Jealousy is understood as an unavoidable part of the human condition, at least in certain situations and ages. It is also much more than a mere feeling; it is the paradigmatic example of the “unstable frontiers” between heart, body, and mind. Indeed, Renée sees jealousy as a “daily gymnastics full of risks” which trains the whole woman and makes her suppler: “It may be only in suffering that a woman can exceed mediocrity . . . [She gains from it] hard-wearing nerves, an inflexible pride, an ability to wait and to conceal which makes her grow, and a scorn for those who are happy.”⁴⁶ The feelings of the suffering “wife” are thus not judged as unfashionable, outdated, and signs of passivity. On the contrary, Colette finishes *The Pure and the Impure* with what is almost an eulogy to jealousy, the feeling during which you never get bored and

hardly grow old.⁴⁷ Instead of being a stumbling block on the woman's way to independence and creativity, jealousy is here a journey into refreshingly disillusioned selfhood.

Discussion: Sleeping with the Enemy

Colette and Kollontai, although writing in different aesthetic and political contexts, both praised women's economic and intellectual independence. They represented New Women in their efforts to educate and support themselves, in the literary and political texts they wrote, as well as through the celebrity image they presented to their contemporaries. Both also worried in similar ways about female dependency in heterosexual relationships.

This focus of concern may in itself seem a bit outdated. Today, many European women (and men) seem to think that the dependency of parenthood is much more threatening than the ties of a couple relation. This indicates which parts of Kollontai's socialist vision have and have not come true. On the one hand, economic and professional independence in marriage is part of the prevailing social norm. The ideal of a pure relationship based on a mutual desire to be together but with no ties or obligations became quite widespread in the 1990s. Increasing numbers of people are also living in LAT (living apart together) relationships, which Kollontai often saw as the preferred model of a functioning marriage.⁴⁸ On the other hand, notwithstanding communal day-care arrangements, European childrearing is more closely connected to the biological parents than it was a century ago as the involvement of neighbors, relatives, and servants has drastically diminished. Kollontai's vision of completely socialized and collectivized motherhood, paired with optional fatherhood, has not been implemented to the same degree as her call for a reformation of marriage. It is also much easier to implement the ideal of an equal and free couple if there are no children involved. Many worry precisely that children may render the independent woman more economically and emotionally dependent on her partner.

Thus, while it is common to hesitate over whether to have children or not, most people today see long-term couple relations as self-evident and desirable. However, in these love relations, contemporary women still suffer from feelings that appear wrong, misplaced, and suspicious from the point of view of their independent selves. Today, we have both historical and scientific evidence telling us that the basic repertoire of human feelings does not change at the same pace as do our modes of production. The tension between what Kollontai labeled “old” and “new” may indeed often exist, but it does not align itself with her chronology. Neither does Kollontai’s metaphorical wish for a new species of women have any relevance for a contemporary understanding of how Darwinian natural selection has affected human emotions and cognition. Interestingly, it is Colette’s approach to desire that appears more compatible with today’s understanding of how some ingredients of love and sexuality have evolved through natural and sexual selection.⁴⁹ These ingredients include the psycho-physiological feelings of arousal, attachment, and jealousy, but also of companionship and maturing over time.

In my understanding, Kollontai did manage to create a place for a positive female corporeality and sexuality, both in her political and literary texts. Kollontai aligned herself with the modernist and progressivistic vision of human sexuality, which she articulated wisely and emphatically. This vision resembles what is taught in contemporary Finnish biology schoolbooks and claims that sexuality should be connected with love, mutual fulfillment, and mutual respect. Desire is essentially about emotions—otherwise, it is trivial or suspect. Colette, by contrast, painted a darker picture of desire as a voluptuous and stubborn “first Sense,” which can be concealed but never fooled. Colette’s notion of “purity” is situated outside any moral conventions and also outside most of human life. Still, her dwelling on the “impure” did not make her a sexual liberalist or relativist. For her, sexual pleasure did not per definition guarantee better human beings; nor did she think that emotions and sexuality, all their variability notwithstanding, could be infinitely or arbitrarily transformed. Colette harbored no utopias, but neither was she saying that the more

complicated and unconventional, the better. Rather, Colette's views turn the causality implied by Kollontai upside down: the conditions of production do not cause a new species with a completely new sexual morality, but unavoidable sexual impurity causes many of the social struggles and human feelings as we know them. And yet, for both of these writers, the past, future, and present always carry more possibilities and nuances than we habitually like to think, and feel.

Notes

This article has developed during my lectures and a virtual course on feminist thought in the early twentieth century, taught in 2002-2004 at the Christina Institute, University of Helsinki. The course material is partly available on the Internet at <http://www.helsinki.fi/kristiina-instituutti/verkkokurssi/feministit/>. I thank Ebba Witt-Brattström and Laura Ruohonen for their helpful comments and references.

¹ Aleksandra Kollontai, "The New Woman," in *The New Morality and the Working Class*, in *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman*, trans. Salvator Attansio (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971),; transcribed for the Marxist Archive [marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/works/new.htm), 2001, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/works/new.htm>); originally published as "Novaia zhenshchina," in *Sovremennyyi mir* 9 (1913) and republished as the first of three essays in Aleksandra Kollontai, *Novaia moral' i rabochii klass* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Vserossiiskogo Tsentral'nogo Komiteta, 1919), 3-35.

² Kollontai, "The New Woman," 35. "Vlast' vekov esche sil'na nad dushoiu dazhe novoi, dazhe kholostoi zhenshchiny. Atavisticheskie chuvstva perebivaiut i oslabliaiut novye perezhivaniia, otzhivshchie poniatiia derzhat v tsepkikh kogtiakh svoikh rvushchiisia na svobodu dukh zhehshchin" ("Novaia zhenshchina," 34-35).

³ "'Tu n'as pas de pire ennemie que toi-même!'" (Colette Willy, *La Vagabonde* [Paris: Ollendorff, 1910], 82, 302). This novel is published in English as *The Vagabond*, trans. Enid

McLeod (1955; reprint New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2001). The translations from *La Vagabonde* given here are my own.

⁴ Colette, *The Pure and the Impure*, trans. Herma Briffault (New York: New York Review of Books, 2000); originally published as *Ces plaisirs...* (Paris: J. Ferenczi et fils, 1932) and in a revised version as *Le pur et l'impur* (Paris: Aux Armes de France, 1941).

⁵ Kollontai, "The New Woman," 76, translation modified. Kollontai appears to have read Colette in French. "Laskaia glaz svoim dushevnym iziashchestvom, budto vsia sotkannaia iz mjagkikh, akvarel'nykh tonov, skol'zit, izbegaia ostrykh kamnei, artistka teatra var'ete – Rene. S razbitymi illiuziami, s izranennym serdtsem ushla ona ot muzha, brosil perchatku svetu, k k kotoromu prinadlezhala kogda-to. . . . Svoboda, nezavisimost' i odinochestvo—venets ee lichnykh zhelanii. No kogda Rene posle dolgogo trudovogo dnia saditsia k kaminu v svoei odinokoi kvartire, ona oshchushchaet, kak bezglazaia toska odinochestva vpolzaet v komnatu i stanovitsia za ee kreslom. 'Ja privykla zhit' odna—zanosit ona v svoi dnevnik—no segodnia ia sebia chuvstvuui takoi odinokoi...' —'Razve ia ne samostaiatel'naia, ne svobodnaia? . . . I . . . uzhasno,— odinokaia" . . . Ne zvuchit li v etoi zhalobe zhenshchina proshlogo, privykshaia slyshat' vokrug sebia znakomye, liubimye golosa, oshchushchat' ch'iu-to privychnuui lasku?" (Kollontai, "Novaia zhenshchina," 11).

⁶ Claudia Lindén, *Om kärlek. Litteratur, sexualitet och politik hos Ellen Key* (On love: Literature, sexuality, and politics in Ellen Key) (Stockholm: Symposion), 76.

⁷ In Finland, Minna Canth similarly contributed both to feminist literature and the women's movement. Her portrait of the female tramp Kauppa-Lopo, an ugly, hilarious woman with great economic talent and clumsy concern for others, is an early version of the female outcasts that Rénée meets in *The Vagabond*. Unlike Colette's and Kollontai's heroines, Kauppa-Lopo has a committed and kind husband who takes care of their child while she leaves for her semi-criminal adventures on

the road. See Laura Ruohonen, “Puliakka vai menetetty runoilija?” (Drunk tramp or failed poet?) *Bibliofilos* 1 (2002): 44-48.

⁸ Kollontai, *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman*; Alexandra Kollontay, *Den nya moralen* (The new morality), trans. Mejt Lindahl (Södertälje: Gidlunds, 1979); *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, trans. Alix Holt (London: Allison and Busby, 1977); for an analysis of Kollontai’s political thought, see Beatrice Farnsworth, *Aleksandra Kollontai: Socialism, Feminism, and the Bolshevik Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1980).

⁹ For example, Eva Moberg, *Kärlek och kön. En studie i Colettes diktning* (Love and sex: A study of Colette’s writing) (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1963).

¹⁰ Judith Thurman, *Secrets of the Flesh: A Life of Colette*. (New York: Bloomsbury, 1999); Julia Kristeva, *Le génie féminin, tome III: Colette* (The female genius. Volume 3: Colette) (Paris: Fayard, 2002).

¹¹ For instance, Thurman, in *Secrets of the Flesh*, mentions Colette and her husband Willy’s invention of the “first real product-spin-off” when their success with the Claudine novels was transformed into theatre, gossip, postcards, celebrity interviews, soaps, and perfume, as well as the couple’s profound mixing of autobiography and fiction in their lives and works (129).

¹² Kollontai, “The New Woman,” 35. “Zhenshchina iz ob'ekta tragedii muzhskoi dushi prevrashchaetsia postepenno v sub'ekt samostoiatel'noi tragedii. . . .” (Kollontai, “Novaia zhenshchina,” 35).

¹³ Kollontai, “The New Woman,” 3; translation modified; both ellipses in the original. “eto kakoi-to novyi . . . tip geroin', neznakomyi ranee, geroin' s samostoiatel'nymi zaprosami na zhizn', geroin', utverzhdauiushchikh svoiu lichnost', geroin', protestuiushchikh protiv vsestoronnego poraboshcheniia zhenshchiny v gosudarstve, v sem'e, v obshchestve, geroin', boriushchikhsia za svoi prava, kak predstavitel'nitsy pola. ‘Kholostye zhenshchiny’—tak vse chashche i chashche opredeliaiut etot tip. ‘Die junggesellinen’. . . Osnovnym zhenskim tipom blizkogo proshlogo byla

‘zhena’, zhenshchina-rezonator, pridatok muzhchiny, ego dopolnenie. Kholostaia zhenshchina menee vsego ‘rezonator’, ona perestala byt' prostym otrazheniem muzhchiny. Kholostaia zhenshchina obladaet samotsennym vnutrennim mirom, zhivet interesami obshchecheloveka, ona vneshne nezavisima i vnutrenno samostoiatel'na . . .” (Kollontai, “Novaia zhenshchina” 5; ellipsis in the original).

¹⁴ Kollontai, “The New Woman,” 15, 30. “milaia zhenskaia pokornost' i miagkost'”, “passivnost', pokornost', podatlivost', mjagkost'” (Kollontai, “Novaia zhenshchina,” 15, 31).

¹⁵ “The New Woman,” 29. “Novaia zhenshchina mogla poiavit'sia, *kak tip*, tol'ko s rostom chisla naemnykh zhenskikh trudovykh sil” (Kollontai, “Novaia zhenshchina,” 30).

¹⁶ Kollontai, “The New Woman,” 2. “my uznaem v nikh chto-to obshchee, ‘vidovoe’” (Kollontai, “Novaia zhenshchina,” 4).

¹⁷ Kollontai, “The New Woman,” 15. “Potomu-to i nabliudaetsia svoego roda ‘estestvennyj otbor’ sredi zhenshchin razlichnykh sloev naseleniia: v razriad ‘samodeiatel'nykh’ vse eshche popadauiut bolee sil'nye, bolee stoikie i samodistsiplinirovannye natury” (Kollontai, “Novaia zhenshchina,” 31).

¹⁸ Kollontai, “The New Woman,” 28-29. “Bunt zhenshchin protiv odnobokosti seksual'noi morali – odna iz naibolee iarkikh chert sovremennoi geroini. Eto i poniatno. Imenno u zhenshchiny, nositel'nitsy budushchego, materi, fiziologiia . . . igraet nesravnennno bol'shuiu rol' v zhizni, chem u muzhchiny. Svoboda chuvstva, svoboda vybora vozliublennogo, vozmozhnogo otsa ‘ee’ rebenka . . . Sovremennye geroini stanoviatsia materiami, ne buduchi zamuzhem” (Kollontai, “Novaia zhenshchina,” 29).

¹⁹ In “Liubov' i novaia moral,” (Love and the new morality), Kollontai connects natural and healthy sexuality with Darwin’s concept of sexual selection, according to which female choice of mating partners crucially shapes the course of evolution: “u moral'nykh norm . . . lish' dve tseli . . .

sodeistvovat' polovomu podboru v intersakh rasy" (Kollontai, "Liubov' i novaia moral," in *Novaia moral' i rabochii klass*, 36-47, 37).

²⁰ Kollontai, "The New Woman," 37. "materinstvo pochtu vseгда rassmatrivalos', kak surrogat shchast'ia . . . Materinstvo redko rassmatrivalos', kak samotsel'" (Kollontai, "Novaia zhenshchina," 23).

²¹ "Zhenskoe 'ia'" ; "chelovecheskoe 'ia'" (Kollontai, "Novaia zhenshchina," 9, 6).

²² Kollontai, "The New Woman," 7. "No kogda volna strasti zakhlestyvaet i ee . . . liubov' – lish' etap, lish' vremennaia ostanovka na zhiznennom puti." (Kollontai, "Novaia zhenshchina," 9).

²³ Kollontai, "The New Woman," 34. "Staroe i novoe nakhjoditsia v dushe zhenshchiny v postoiannoii vrazhde. Sovremennym geroiniam prikhoditsia poetomu vesti bor'bu na dva fronta: s vneshnim mirom i s gluboko sidiashchimi v nikh samikh sklonnostiami ikh praroditel'nits Perevospitanie psikhiki zhenshchiny primenitel'no k novym usloviyam ee ekonomicheskogo i sotisal'nogo sushchestvovaniia daetsia ne bez glubokoi, dramaticheskoi lomki" (Kollontai, "Novaia zhenshchina," 35).

²⁴ Aleksandra Kollontai, *Red Love* (New York: Seven Arts Publishing Co, 1927), also transcribed by Sally Ryan for the Marxist Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/works/rind.htm>, 1998; originally published as "Vasilisa Malygina" (1924) in *Liubov' pchel trudovykh*, (Moscow-Petrograd: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1924), 67-304.

²⁵ Aleksandra Kollontai, *Theses on Communist Morality in the Sphere of Marital Relations*, trans. Alix Holt, in *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, 225-232; originally published as "Tezisy o kommunisticheskoi morali v sfere brachnykh otnoshenii," in *Kommunistka*, no. 12-13 (1921).

²⁶ Eric Naiman, *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.)

²⁷ Aleksandra Kollontai, *Polozhenie zhenshchiny v evoliutsii khoziaistva. Lektsii chitannye v Universitete im. Ia.M.Sverdlova* (The situation of women in the evolution of the economy. Lectures held at the Sverdlov University) (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1922), 4-5.

²⁸ Eva Adolfsson, "Rösten har en kropp! Alexandra Kollontaj, misogynin och det kvinnliga talet" (The voice has a body! Aleksandra Kollontai, misogyny and the female speech), in *Hör, jag talar! Essäer om litteraturens skäl* (Listen, I speak! Essay on the reason of literature) (Stockholm, Albert Bonniers förlag, 2003), 56-88.

²⁹ Kollontai, *The New Woman*, 9. "I Rene, kogda vstrechaet na puti svoem nastoichivuiu libov'-priviazannost', pozvoliaet naletevshchei volne i ee podkhvatit'. No strast' ne oslepliaet, ne tumanit privychnogo k analizu mozga. —'Ce ne sont que mes sens qui sont attaqués ('Zadety lish' struny chuvstvennosti'), —konstatiruet ona s grustnym sozhaleniem,—'point d'autres délires que celui de mes sens' ('Lish' chuvstvennost' op'ianiaet,-nichto drugoe'). Rene trezveet. Novaia liubov' ne daet togo, chto iskala Rene. V ob'iatiakh liubimogo—ona poprezhenmu odinoka. I 'la Vagabonde' ('Brodiazhka') bezhit, bezhit ot svoei liubvi, bezhit potomu, chto eta liubov' tak daleka ot ee utonchennykh zaprosov liubvi" (Kollontai, "Novaia zhenshchina," 11).

³⁰ Colette Willy, *La Vagabonde*, 322.

³¹ Ibid., 302.

³² "Il est bon, il est simple, il m'admire, il est sans détour ? Mais alors, c'est mon inférieur, et je me mésallie . . . Il m'éveille d'un regard, et je cesse de m'appartenir, s'il pose sa bouche sur la mienne ? Alors, c'est mon ennemi, c'est le pillard qui me vole à moi-même!" (ibid., 321).

³³ "Tu étais venu pour partager ma vie . . . Partager, oui: *prendre ta part!* Être de moitié dans mes actes, t'introduire à chaque heure dans la pagode secrète de mes pensées, n'est-ce pas ? Pourquoi toi plutôt qu'un autre? Je l'ai fermée à tous" (ibid., 335 ; ellipsis in the original).

³⁴ Colette, *The Pure and the Impure*, 157; translation modified; Colette's ellipsis. "Si je vous appelais monstres, quel nom donnerais-je à ce qu'on m'inflige pour normal? Voyez, sur le mur,

l'ombre de cette effrayante épaule, l'expression de ce vaste dos et de la nuque embarrassée de sang . . . O monstres, ne me laissez pas seule. . . . ' (Colette, *Le pur et l'impur* [Paris : Hachette], 1971, 162-63).

³⁵ “Ces plaisirs qu'on nomme, à la légère, physiques. . .” (Kristeva, 399); Colette, *Ces plaisirs*....

³⁶ Judith Thurman, Introduction to *The Pure and the Impure*, x.

³⁷ Kristeva, 399-412.

³⁸ Colette, *The Pure and Impure*, 123, 119, 125; translation modified; concluding ellipsis in original. “de là s'élève, rigide et fleuri comme l'iris appuyé à sa verte lance, un sentiment unique. . . . Deux femmes bien éprises n'évitent pas la volupté, ni une sensualité plus éparse que le spasme, et plus que lui chaude. . . . ce sont ces délices de la présence constante et de l'habitude qui engendrent et excusent la fidélité. Brièveté merveilleuse des jours pareils à la lampe répercutée dans une perspective des miroirs! Comme il arrive aux êtres parfaitement heureux, sa cadette néglige tout moyen d'expression et, muette, devient une ombre suave. . . . Elle perd jusqu'à son nom, que lady Eleanor n'écrit presque jamais au cours de son 'Journal'. Elle s'appelle désormais 'Bien-Aimée', et 'Meilleure Moitié', et 'Délices de mon cœur'. . .” (Colette, *Le pur et l'impur*, 127, 123, 129).

³⁹ Colette, *The Pure and the Impure*, 50 ; translation modified; Colette's ellipsis. “Leur plaisir n'était que trop vrai. Leurs larmes aussi. Mais leur plaisir surtout . . .” (Colette, *Le pur et l'impur*, 55).

⁴⁰ Colette, *The Pure and the Impure*, 22; translation modified; opening ellipsis in the original. “Mais qu'est-ce que c'est que le cœur, Madame? Il vaut moins que sa réputation. Il est bien commode, il accepte tout. On le meuble avec ce qu'on a, il est si peu difficile. . . . Le corps, lui . . . A la bonne heure ! il a comme on dit la gueule fine, il sait ce qu'il veut. Un cœur, ça ne choisit pas. On finit toujours par aimer” (Colette, *Le pur et l'impur*, 27).

⁴¹ Colette, *The Pure and the Impure*, 25; translation modified; Colette's ellipses. "Les sens? Pourquoi pas *le* sens? Ce serait pudique, et suffisant. *Le sens*: cinq autres sous-sens s'aventurent loin de lui, qui les rappelle d'une secousse, —ainsi des rubans légers et urticants, mi-herbes, mi-bras délégués par une créature sous-marine . . . Sens, seigneurs intraitables, ignorants comme les princes d'autrefois qui n'apprenaient que l'indispensable: dissimuler, haïr, commander . . . mais qui donc peut fixer vos instables frontières? . . ." (Colette, *Le pur et l'impur*, 30).

⁴² Eva Moberg shows that Colette's heroines mostly follow the typology of young, adult, and old woman, of whom the adult is the least in control of her senses.

⁴³ "Cher ami, il y a donc une jalousie qui n'est pas physique?" (Colette, *Le pur et l'impur*, 42).

⁴⁴ "Une héroïne toute en chair telle que moi" (Colette Willy, *La Vagabonde*, 328); Kristeva, 412.

⁴⁵ "Car elle /la jalousie/ est le seul mal que nous endurons sans nous y accoutumer" (Colette, *Le pur et l'impur*, 181).

⁴⁶ "il n'y a guère que dans la douleur qu'une femme soit capable de dépasser la médiocrité. . . elle y gagne . . . des nerfs inusables, un inflexible orgueil, une faculté d'attendre, de dissimuler, qui la grandit, et le dédain de ce qui sont heureux" (Colette Willy, *La Vagabonde*, 38-39).

⁴⁷ "On n'a pas le temps de s'ennuyer avec la jalousie, a-t-on seulement celui de vieillir?" (Colette, *Le pur et l'impur*, 177).

⁴⁸ Elina Haavio-Mannila and Osmo Kontula, "Sexual Trends in the Baltic Area," in *Publications of the Population Research Institute*, series D, no 41 (Helsinki: The Family Federation of Finland, 2003): 18, 37-41.

⁴⁹ For example, David M. Buss, *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).