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***Mes Tissages: Self-fashioning and Performance in the Autobiographical
Work of Sand, Bernhardt and Colette***

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Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

December 2019

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Alexandra Wettlaufer, my supervisor, for her support, patience, guidance, and encouragement throughout this project. I would also like to thank the department of French and Italian as well as my graduate coordinator Jessica Luhn for her resources and assistance. Finally, I wish to thank my parents Odile and Jacky Zembski for following me on my research trips and bringing me to Nohant and Saint-Sauveur. I could not have finished my dissertation project without them, or my dog Brewsky and their unconditional love.

Abstract

Mes Tissages: Self-fashioning and Performance in the Autobiographical Work of Sand, Bernhardt and Colette.

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2019

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This dissertation examines the self-fashioning of three female writers/artists, George Sand (1804-1876), Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923) and Gabrielle-Sidonie Colette (1873-1954). Considering their shared affinity with writing and the theater, I argue that each author refashions her self-portrait and public image by means of a unique textual performance, which is conveyed through clothing on stage as actresses (Bernhardt and Colette), backstage as playwrights, and on the page as authors. My goal in this work is to connect the autobiographical corpus of these three writers to the art of needlework and textile in the context of genre, gender, identity and performance. I am particularly interested in the ways fabric serves as a literal and metaphoric second skin to Sand, Bernhardt and Colette, who present the private self (the feminine body) to the public. First, I will analyze how Sand uses a patchwork of various genres in *Histoire de ma vie* (1854). Next, I will focus on Sarah Bernhardt's ability to use the autobiographical genre as a draping cloth to perform various identities in a fiction of her reality in order to conceal the

self in *Ma double vie* (1907) and in the visual arts. I ultimately show how Colette embroiders an imaginary canvas as a form of metaphor in *Claudine* series (1900-1904), and *La Vagabonde* (1911) as well as three later works: *La maison de Claudine*'s "La couseuse" (1922), *Mes apprentissages* (1936) and *Broderie ancienne* (1944). Textual analysis of autobiographies, memoirs, auto-fictions, and manuscripts, as well as close studies of agendas, newspapers and correspondence comprise the various sources I examine. I most importantly focus on the role of textiles *in* and *within* the autobiographical narratives in order to analyze the authors' strategies to subvert the dominant phallogentric discourses and power structures from the fall of the July Monarchy with the Revolution of 1848 to the end of *La Belle Époque* in 1914.

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MES TISSAGES: SELF-FASHIONING AND PERFORMANCE IN THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WORK OF SAND, BERNHARDT AND COLETTE

Introduction

My dissertation examines the self-fashioning of three female writers/artists, George Sand (1804-1876), Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923) and Gabrielle-Sidonie Colette (1873-1954). Considering their shared affinity for writing and the theater, I argue that each of these woman-authors refashions her self-portrait by means of a unique textual performance, which is conveyed through costuming on stage as actresses (Bernhardt and Colette), backstage as playwrights, and on the page as authors. Specifically, I focus on their use of the autobiographical genre as a vehicle to (re)shape their identity and public image. My goal in this work is to connect the autobiographies of these three writers to their use of (or the art of) needlework and clothing in the context of gender, identity, and performance. I first analyze how Sand uses a patchwork of various genres in *Histoire de ma vie* (1854). Next, I focus on Sarah Bernhardt's ability to use the autobiographical genre as a draping cloth to perform various identities in a fiction of her reality in order to conceal the self in *Ma double vie* (1907) and in the visual arts. I ultimately show how Colette embroiders an imaginary canvas as a form of metaphor in *Claudine* series (1900-1904), and *La Vagabonde* (1911) as well as three later works: *La maison de Claudine*'s "La couseuse" (1922), *Mes apprentissages* (1936) and *Broderie ancienne* (1944). My goal in this work is to connect the autobiographical corpus of these three writers to the art of weaving and

embroidering textiles, as well as playing with fabric in the context of genre, gender, identity and performance. Therefore, I claim that the writings of Sand, Bernhardt and Colette on the role of textiles *in* and *within* the autobiographical narratives reveal the authors' strategies to subvert the dominant phallogentric discourses and power structures from the fall of the July Monarchy with the Revolution of 1848 to the end of *La Belle Époque* in 1914.

During the nineteenth century, the oppressive French patriarchal system did not give a public voice to women, but rather reinforced their domestication through social and legal constraints. Therefore, assuming any role in the public sphere as an author remained challenging—though not impossible—for women, who were frequently forced to mask their gender, either by collaborating with male authors or publishing under a pen name in order to establish “legitimacy” and find an audience. By mid-century, with the rise of capitalism and the bourgeoisie, combined with a growing market for literature and artistic production as well as a new wave of feminist activism, women were increasingly eager to claim a place for themselves in the public sphere. The Revolution of 1848 marked a turning point in French history as the social uprising of *le peuple* led to a short-lived Republic, only to be replaced by the right-leaning Second Empire a few years later. 1848 is also the year when George Sand, who was at the peak of her career as a distinguished author, began writing her autobiography, *Histoire de ma vie*, which was later published from 1854 to 1855.

I am particularly concerned with the impact of conflicts (political, social, and personal) on these three women's autobiographical writings. Starting with Sand's hybridity

of genres in *Histoire de ma vie*, I suggest that the ground-breaking author's narrative style and the diffusion of her ideas on gender and idealism impacted future generations of writer-actresses and female artists like Sarah Bernhardt and Colette. Indeed, Sarah Bernhardt started a memoir, *Ma double vie*, while at the peak of her fame in 1898; Gabrielle-Sidonie Colette, meanwhile, composed a series of four autofictions, the *Claudine* series, published under her husband's name, Willy, between 1900 and 1903. Given that George Sand mentored and launched Sarah Bernhardt's career as an actress, who in turn inspired Colette, I am most intrigued by the role of needlework and textiles around the question of performance and presentation in the women's autobiographical discourse during socialist and republican regimes.¹

In *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender and Self-Portraiture*, Françoise Lionnet's theory of *métissage* focuses on the ways women's autobiographical fictions put into practice the interconnectedness of the various traditions, particularly women-writers who live between the gaps of different cultures and languages, such as that of standard French and Francophone dialects (7). Drawing from Lionnet's definition of autobiographical hybridity, I define *métissage* as the art of creating any kind of work that interweaves two separate parts with the means to create a new entity that has an identity of its own. The result of this hybrid assemblage ultimately destabilizes the norms and the binaries. While *métissage* is a term that applies within the context of racial hybridity, I in contrast, explore the etymology of the word that is associated with textiles. In fact, the

¹ Colette was mesmerized by Bernhardt's dress and performance on stage as the Byzantine Empress Theodora. See Pommier, 233.

word *métis* derives from Latin *mixtus* whose primary meaning refers to cloth made of two different fibers such as cotton and flax (Lionnet, 14). Drawing from Lionnet's theory and the etymology of the word *métis*, I suggest "mes tissages" (my weavings) is the best description for the way in which Sand, Bernhardt and Colette weave the word to design a customized autobiographical text. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, Roland Barthes explains that "Text means *Tissue*," that is to say "the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving" (64). Since text signifies *tissue* and *tissue* means fabric, therefore, fabric is text. Hence, I claim that the women authors shape a "fabric of self" within their autobiographical writing, which I call *une fabrique de soi*.

I will show that the result of this creation intertwines feminine and masculine traditions as well as autofiction and biographical facts in order to self-fashion an identity of its own that displaces the dominant discourse of the male autobiographical model. Using the metaphor of text as textile, I further assert that Sand and Colette draw from the art of needlework, more specifically patchwork quilt and embroidery, to construct the autobiographical text. Because *tissue* can mean both cloth and skin, I will demonstrate that Bernhardt use drapery as a protective second skin in *Ma double vie*. Additionally, "textile" comes from the Latin word *textilis*, and means a web and a woven fabric and since both "textile" and "text" derive from *texere*, to weave, I associate the art of weaving to the art of writing. I demonstrate that the choice of textile worn by Bernhardt were similar to the choice of grammar and words that also contribute to presenting the self.² Therefore, I

² For the etymology of the word "texture." See Douglas Harper.

examine the form, the function and the content of the text to show that needlework and textile influenced the autobiographical work of all three women authors and present characteristics that boldly transgresses the norms of the genre.

With the growing interest in nineteenth-century literary studies in the role played by fashion, cross-dressing and disguise as tools for female protagonists' transgression in fiction, and a growing focus on women's autobiographical narratives, the correlation between the function of textiles and needlework with writing the self is a topic that can lead to a better understanding of women's literature, cultures and traditions. In *Weaving the Word*, Kathryn Sullivan explains in that weaving textiles has been a metaphor across civilizations for the creation of a story, a plot, or a world (24). Additionally, for most cultures across history, the production of textiles was specifically a female activity, and while ancient cultures and tribes designated a particular female goddess who weaves, such as Isis of Egypt, Athena of Greece and Ixchel of the Mayans to list a few, many deities are also associated with linguistic development (24). Therefore, I suggest that Sand, Bernhardt and Colette applied their knowledge and practice of the feminine traditions to establish a new type of discourse that brings forth a new vision of the modern woman with a new role in the society.

Sand, Bernhardt and Colette blurred the boundaries of gender and worked outside the distinct realms of the masculine and the feminine. My investigation seeks to understand how Sand's, Bernhardt's and Colette's autobiographies impacted their career as "self-made women" and authors who faced critics alone. Throughout the nineteenth century, the cleavage between different categories of social status, the misogynistic mind-set, and the

eagerness for emancipation plays an important role in understanding for instance, Sarah Bernhardt's rise from a proletarian family's neglected child to Parisian idol, and Colette's transgressive path from the provincial young girl with no dowry to the author of the most popular novels of 1900s Paris. Bernhardt serves as a connection and a transition between Sand and Colette.³ In that sense, I analyze the strategies of all three authors for (re)inventing the self. I will prove that each writer's self-fashioning embodies an *avant-garde* modern businesswoman thanks to her independent financial situation, her assiduous artistic work, her self-drive and ultimately, her affinity for textiles.

Self-fashioning, according to Stephen Greenblatt, is the process of constructing a powerful identity from the margins of an authoritative institution (5). I examine how each women-author transgressed the codes of society to establish a position of authority as respected public figures. In the chapters that follow, I analyze how Sand, Bernhardt and Colette cross the boundaries between the creation of literary characters, the shaping of one's own identity, and the experience of being molded by forces outside one's control in their attempt to fashion other selves, following Greenblatt's criteria. Clothes play a significant part in their ability to take on different personalities to bypass these norms. Despite their distinctive paths, life experiences, artistic endeavors, and social class, the three authors present numerous similarities as female artists who embody modernity at different times in history.

Exploring the context of these women's upbringing and the relationship they shared

³ Sarah's aristocratic father abandoned her mother, Youle, because of social class status. Youle later supported herself financially as a kept-woman. Bernhardt was of Jewish origins. See Sommerville, 100.

with their mothers, I will show that for Sand and Colette, needlework was first rejected as domestic art, but reexplored later in life for therapeutic reasons and recuperation maternal love. The absence of mother figure and maternal attention in Bernhardt's life directed the actress to seek this maternal love from the public. Exposing the self to the public eye as a woman writer and artist triggered gossip, defamation and criticism for all three women. For instance, Sand's unladylike habits of smoking cigarettes, her love affairs and her refusal to join the feminist movement, led people to accuse her of being neither woman nor man (Roberts, 205). Likewise, critics scrutinized Sarah Bernhardt for her Jewish origins and her thin figure, whereas Colette was criticized for her sexual dissidence. How did each one manage to stitch back her public image and to regain a position of authority, even as a misogynistic society and the pressure of authority sought to undermine it? What triggered each one of them psychologically to decide to compose an autobiography? What level of oppression did three women writers, artists, and single mothers confront in terms of gender and gender roles as female writer on the page and on the stage? Did these autobiographical writings serve as a vessel to voice legal rights? Was the purpose of these autobiographies an act of rebellion or did they seek revenge? Françoise Lionnet also defines *métissage* as a form of *bricolage*, that is to say, "a site of indeterminacy, where solidarity becomes the fundamental principle of political action against hegemonic languages" (9). Were needlework and textile this bricolage that created a space for all three women to connect?

Chapter 1: Autobiography as a Patchwork Quilt in George Sand's *Histoire de ma vie*

“Fée Azote, chatoyante et parée
d’une robe cousue par la
grande George Sand, tu ne
viens plus toucher de ta
baguette qui donnait le
bonheur mais tu me suis et
je regarde avec tendresse
ton brun visage et ta
chevelure flottante,
reflets des enchantements
de mon enfance.”

Aurore Sand,
*Marionnettes*⁴

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the concepts of text and textile to posit that George Sand's hybridity/*métissage* in the autobiographical work *Histoire de ma vie* (1854) is a form of patchwork quilt that presents a new method of female authorial self-fashioning in the literary genre. *Histoire de ma vie* was a seven-year long project during which Sand was committed to reaching a vast audience of different social classes, genders and political positions. Her focus during this writing project as well as her endeavors in needlework was both personal and philanthropic, two essential concepts she set forth on April 15, 1847 in *Histoire de ma vie*'s epigraph, “Charité envers les autres; Dignité envers soi-même”

⁴ This unpublished text was written by Aurore Sand. “Les marionnettes” and was published for the first time in 1978 by Les amis de George Sand and was transferred by Madame Smeets Sand. Aurore Sand's drawings were added as illustrations to the text and were offered by Martine Beaufils. See Aurore Sand, 7.

(*Histoire de ma vie*, 41). In the first chapter, “Autobiography as a Patchwork Quilt in George Sand’s *Histoire de ma vie*,” I contend that Sand’s autobiographical writing marked a new season for George Sand as well as another step in the fashioning of her identity.⁵ While scholars such as Martine Reid assert that in *Histoire de ma vie*, Sand establishes an identity “ailleurs” (elsewhere), I concede that the woman-writer’s autobiography deviates from the norms and Realism in favor for a more abstract method of constructing the self that shares the aesthetic values of Idealism (174). Following the metaphor of text and textile, I will show that *Histoire de ma vie* was a work apart in which the author stitched a new fabric of self along with the morals of a nation by assembling various fragments, patches, of her life story. I will argue that Sand drew her inspiration from needlework as a means to construct a counter-autobiographical model. *Histoire de ma vie* moves beyond the physical and mental limits imposed by patriarchy and phallogentric discourses by blurring the boundaries of genre and gender.

PORTRAYALS OF GEORGE SAND AND HER “TRAVAUX D’AIGUILLE”

George Sand’s Needlework Through the Eyes of Family and Friends

With more than seventy novels, thirty-one plays and two thousand letters penned throughout her life, George Sand established herself as one of the first French woman-authors who earned a living off of her writings. Beyond Sand’s assiduous daily work composing this extensive literary repertoire, the woman-writer was also actively engaged

⁵ It is important to take the timeline of this project into consideration which started in April 1847 and ended in June 1855 as Sand wrote the last chapter XIII of the fifth volume.

each day in ongoing needlework projects such as sewing, stitching, embroidery, and tapestry. Thanks to Alexandre Manceau, whose agendas provided a detailed list of the author's activities in Nohant from 1852 to 1876, we discover Sand's numerous needlework projects in most of Manceau's daily entries.⁶ For instance, in May 1852, Manceau wrote, "Madame seule travaille à sa broderie" and on July 23, "...depuis les lectures du soir, elle brode toujours" (*Agendas Tome 1*, 30, 20).⁷ The agendas convey a well-established habit that took place at Nohant during the evening, prior to Sand's long nights of writing. For instance, the entries on August 3 and 26, 1852 note that "Mme monte et pose un dessus de cheminée brodée par elle"; "Le soir, elle brode et monte à 11h pour travailler sur son *roman du Siècle*," which will soon become Sand's autobiography, *Histoire de ma vie* (*Agendas*, Tome 1, 45; 51).

The agendas also attest that Sand regularly practiced several needlework techniques from tapestry to dressmaking. On June 9, 1852, Manceau pointed out that Sand began to create her own tapestry patterns and, later, on January 1, 1857, following a copious dinner and a game of dominos with her guests to celebrate the New Year, Sand worked on a tapestry before retiring to her office upstairs to write letters.⁸ As a domestic seamstress, "Mme coud un peu à ses robes" (September 18, 1855) and on both October 14 and November 30, 1859, "Mme passe ses journées à coudre au salon" (55; 233). Thus,

⁶ George Sand, *Agendas*, Trans. Ann. by Anne Chevereau, Les amis de George Sand, Tome 1-4 (1852-1876).

⁷ Alexandre Manceau was an engraver and a playwright, as well as Sand's secretary and last lover following her rupture with Chopin.

⁸ "Madame compose des dessins de tapisserie..." See *Agendas*, Tome 1, 32.

Manceau's entries testify that Sand's needlework routines occupied her schedule on a daily basis the same way writing filled up her nights, but most importantly, "les travaux d'aiguille" took place at the hearth of the domestic sphere, specifically in the living room, even when Sand welcomed her friends in Nohant. Ultimately, the agendas as well as Sand's *Correspondances* both confirm a significant increase in needlework projects after 1848, which is also the same year she began to pen *Histoire de ma vie*.

Despite the woman writer's affinity for needlework and writing *au quotidien*, Sand only devoted a one-page digression to needlework in *Histoire de ma vie*. Yet, family and friends often portrayed the author as a needleworking woman. In a nostalgic lyrical poem entitled *Marionnettes* for instance, Aurore Sand eulogized her grandmother's talent as a dressmaker for the puppets of the Nohant theater: "Fée Azote, chatoyante et parée d'une robe cousue par la grande George Sand, tu ne viens plus toucher ta baguette" (6). The puppet's dress, described as "chatoyante," brings forth a sense of enchantment as well as the presence of its maker who sewed the outfit but can no longer use the needle, metaphorically compared to a magic wand. Aurore Sand's poem shows that clothes defy time and awaken memories of the person who stitched them. In addition, every stitch woven by George Sand not only binds the different parts of the physical garment, but the result of its assemblage also connects two generations of women through its sentimental value. In similar fashion to every stitch present in embroidery, dressmaking, and patchwork/quilts, the words on the written pages of an autobiography are also meant to defy time and to connect members of different generations.

In Art: Delacroix's Double Portrait and Creativity Captured in The Moment

Needle or Cigarette? : Sand and the Stigma of Smoking

One of George Sand's closest friends, Eugène Delacroix, indicates in one of his journal entries dated October 1849 that "la confection de costumes" keeps the woman-author busy during his visits (Delacroix, 113). I will argue, Delacroix had already captured a moment of artistic needlework creation in his 1838 unfinished double portrait entitled *George Sand and Chopin*. In fact, the French painter depicted Chopin playing the piano while George Sand, who was sitting by the musician's side, clenched some fabric with her right hand and held what has long been considered a thin cigarette in the other. Because Delacroix was notorious for smoking "des cigarettes de paille" and often shared them with Sand as she states in 1834 as well as in her *Correspondances*, scholars such as Claude Moins and Lee Johson presume that Delacroix captured the French woman-author partaking of their common pleasure and smoking a cigarette in this double portrait (Johnson, 52).⁹ However, the unfinished status of the painting, the salon's dim light, the position of her two hands and the proportion of Sand's left hand compared to the size of the supposed cigarette lead me to hypothesize Delacroix's intention to blur the line between a cigarette and a needle. Hence, I propose it is equally plausible that the painter portrayed his friend engaged in a sewing project while Chopin composed new melodies in her salon – the room which, according to Manceau's agendas, Sand occupied not only to sew, to embroider and to make tapestry, but also to welcome guests in Nohant (Illustration 1).

⁹ In her *Correspondence* to Musset, Sand wrote "Ce matin j'ai posé chez Delacroix [...] J'ai causé avec lui en fumant des cigarettes de paille." See Lubin Edition vol. 2 (1834), 43.



Illustration 1: One part of Delacroix's double portrait *George Sand and Chopin* (1838) representing George Sand

Representing Madame George Sand Holding the Needle: Taboo Topic and Controversies

I posit this double reading of Delacroix's portrait and the undecidable presence of the cigarette/needle in his painting of 1838 as a way of concealing and revealing Sand's double nature as an unorthodox woman (via the cigarette) and her more conventional passion for the art of needlework—a technique the author would also employ in *Histoire de ma vie*. Many controversies surround the details of this unfinished double portrait. For example, critics such as Alphonse Moreau, Raymond Escholier and Maurice Serillaz argue that Delacroix represented Sand in a standing position while holding a cigarette and that the first owner of the painting, Constant Dutilleul, doctored the double portraits before separating the artwork into two frames in 1873 (Moins, 64).¹⁰ Conversely, Françoise Alexandre's analysis of Sand's body language not only confirmed the seated position, but she also observed that the cigarette was awkwardly held backwards between the index and the thumb (22).¹¹

Besides these blurred details regarding Sand's unconventional style of holding the object, I question Delacroix's decision to juxtapose a piece of cloth and a cigarette whose size resembles more that of a needle since the proportions appear too thin to be a cigarette compared to Sand's limbs and body. What is clear in this portrait is that Sand's pensive state and body language both illustrate a weaving motion that was suddenly interrupted,

¹⁰ Sand's portrait is exposed at the Ordrupgaard Museum in Copenhagen, whereas Chopin's is at the Louvre Museum in Paris.

¹¹ Following a close inspection of the authentic portrait on site, Françoise Alexandre noticed that a bandage previously protected the left thumb and that the phalanges showed signs of swelling. See Alexandre 22.

perhaps by Chopin's melody. In comparing Sand's hands (Illustration 3) with other portraits of needlewomen, like that of Joseph Court's painting entitled *Rigolette Seeking to Distract Herself during the Absence of Germain* (1844) (Illustration 2) similarities in the proportions, including in the position of the thumb, the forefinger and the middle finger on the object are evident.

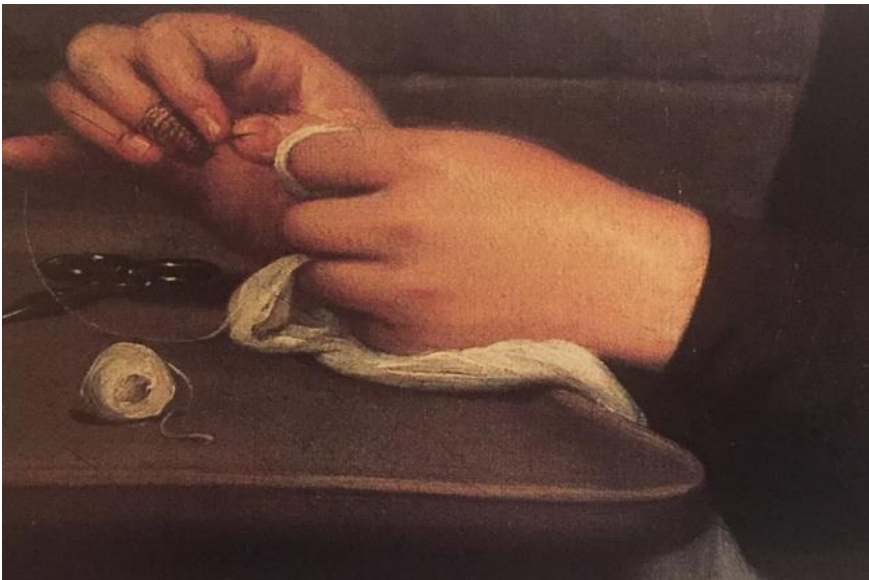


Illustration 2: *Rigolette Seeking to Distract Herself During the Absence of Germain* (1844) by Joseph Court.



Illustration 3: *George Sand and Chopin* (1838) by Delacroix. Detail.

As we first focus on Sand's placement of the arm in relation to the cloth and then on the orientation of the needle, we observe that both the arm and the needle mimic the weaving motion of the thread following through and away from the fabric. What is important here is that even though the painting stayed unfinished and its details are dimmed and blurred, it is unlikely that Delacroix intended to capture Sand in moment of passivity knowing that she lived an active and busy life; rather, I will argue, the painter sought to capture a moment of equal artistic creation for both the woman-writer and the pianist.

The cigar, the needle and the pen: channeling androgyny

Consequently, I set forth that the main purpose of the painting portrayed Sand engaged in needlework, but I also posit that Delacroix intended to blur the nature of the object in order to stay true to the complex character he portrayed. Indeed, George Sand was an established French woman writer with a male pen name, who wrote, sewed and smoked

in a nineteenth-century society that did not give a public voice to women nor allowed subversion of gender norms, but rather reinforced their domestication through social and legal constraints. Because Sand's renown as a cigarette user was part and parcel of her reputation as an unconventional woman—as we will see through Elizabeth Barrett Browning's anticipated encounter with George Sand—critics and scholars have simply concluded that Sand held a cigarette in Delacroix's 1838 double portrait and therefore, the object was often overlooked. In her 1860 essay, British social theorist Harriet Martineau stated that “the needle is to a woman what the cigar is to men –a tranquilizing equalizing influence, conservative and restorative” and while nineteenth-century French society, authority and patriarchy controlled both men's and women's codes of conduct, crossing these particular boundaries of gender behavior negatively impacted the individual's image (597). At the same time then, persisting and repeating a controversial habit in the public sphere is a performative act of subversion. Sand was paradoxically as happy confirming as resisting conventions as she plied the needle as frequently and as skillfully as the pen or the cigarette, all of which could have been suggested in Delacroix's painting. In this sense, the ambiguity of the object points to transgressions of fixed norms as it brings to light multiplicities of meaning and gender fluidity.

1848: writing, needlework and the autobiographical project of solidarity and gender fluidity

A correlation thus exists between Delacroix's 1838 unfinished painting, in the ambiguity that surrounds the type of object held in Sand's left hand, and the absent presence of needlework in Sand's recounting of *Histoire de ma vie*. I contend that prior to 1848,

Sand resisted the idea of being portrayed in literature and in art as a seamstress. Indeed, the *Correspondances* preceding 1848 reveal that most of Sand's domestic activities consisted of drawing, decorating cigar boxes, hunting, horseback riding, crafting glove boxes, fostering knowledge on botanics and making straw hats, but not once did the woman-author allude to "les travaux d'aiguilles."¹² Conversely, the letters from 1848 to 1854, also the time frame during which Sand wrote *Histoire de ma vie*, show that Sand openly shared ideas on needlework projects. Therefore, it is clear that 1848 marked a change in Sand's life and while stitching fabric increased for various causes, the woman author also began to pen the pages of her autobiography.

My goal is to show how needlework was an important factor in the writing process of *Histoire de ma vie*, and particularly in the fashioning of a third type of autobiography: one whose form and content is both androgynous and hybrid in ways that defies the binaries along with the Symbolic Order. Marjorie Garber challenges the Lacanian concept of the Symbolic order with the definition of a concept that she calls "the Third."¹³ While Lacan maintains that the Symbolic Order regroups a register of codes engraved in hegemonic language, hierarchy, laws and power that human subjects of a culture must abide by, Garber explains that "the Third" disrupts these codes and displaces the possibility of stable binaries (12).¹⁴ In the pages that follow I explore how Garber's concept of the "Third" applies to

¹² See *Correspondence* Lubin Edition (1812-1831) 439, 580, 627, 670, 680.

¹³ The Symbolic order is a register of language, hierarchy, law, and power –the world 'out there' to which the human subject must come to relate through the immersion in the codes and constraints of culture" See Garber, 12.

¹⁴ Marjorie Garber investigates how the "Third World," the "third sex," and the "third actor" are notions that disrupts culturally constructed codes, 12.

Sand's autobiography in ways that deconstruct the binaries of male and female, disrupting hierarchy and the hegemonic language, while also questioning the idea of "one" identity. Because "the Third" deconstructs the binary of self, such as egocentrism and individualistic self-views, I will consequently show how *Histoire de ma vie* oscillates from the egotistic autobiographical male model to a gender-neutral and more collective type of autobiographical writing. In similar fashion to the making of a patchwork, this genre-disrupting memoir channels a message of solidarity, creativity, autonomy and unity as a new vision for the mid-nineteenth century society.

George Sand and *Aurora Leigh*: the art of weaving the word to craft a new vision

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Tributes to George Sand and The Representation of Needle Workers as Artists

Moving beyond constructions of women's passivity, domesticity and timidity in favor of an identity based in independence, mobility and creativity were ideals that George Sand embraced in real life and that Elizabeth Barrett Browning set forth in 1856 *Aurora Leigh*. This epic verse-novel was primarily inspired by George Sand whom the Victorian poet admired.¹⁵ In 1844, Barrett Browning first paid tribute to Sand in two sonnets entitled "To George Sand. I. A Desire" and "To George Sand. II. A Recognition" in which she praised the French woman writer's genius and transcendence (*Poems*, 147-148). In a letter dated September 1844, Barrett Browning already voiced her adoration and interest in

¹⁵ Elizabeth Barrett Browning paid tribute to Sand in two poems "To George Sand. I. A Desire" and "To George Sand. II. A Recognition" in which she praised the French woman writer's genius, her transcendence and shared on her views on gender.

corresponding with the French author: “I would give anything to have a letter from her [George Sand], though it smelt cigars” (Sullivan, 155). Later correspondence between Sand and Barrett Browning proves that the French woman-writer and the Victorian poet first met in Paris in February 1852.¹⁶ Despite the novelist’s busy schedule, Sand’s letters demonstrated her willingness to encounter the British poet and her husband.¹⁷

The day of the visit between the women authors, however, left Barrett Browning astounded, since the French novelist’s looks and demeanor did not match what was expected. In fact, George Sand did not smoke, nor did she wear the notorious masculine styled-clothed best known as “the fashionable waistcoat & jacket” but rather, the French author looked a little too much *endimanchée* in her outfit and altogether feminine (*Letters* 475, 352).¹⁸ Barrett Browning’s letter attests to the complexity of Sand’s public image along with the stigma that surrounded Sand’s persona and gender. Although Mrs. Browning’s protagonist Aurora Leigh neither smokes cigarettes nor wears pants with a fitted redingote, she shares many traits and biographical facts with Sand. In similar fashion to Sand, Aurora Leigh belongs to an upper-class family and chooses work over marriage, with the result that she must find ways to earn a living as an independent writer.

Considering Barrett Browning’s admiration for the French author, scholars such as Radley and Taplin believe that the protagonist’s first name Aurora might well be a tribute

¹⁶ On April 7 1852, Elizabeth Barrett Browning writes to Mary Russell Mitford, “George Sand we came to know a great deal more of.” See *Brownings’ Correspondence*, Letter 3032.

¹⁷ Sand responded to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “Je serai chez moi vendredi.” See “28 February 1852, Sand, George to Brownin Elizabeth Barrett.”

¹⁸ In the letter, Barrett Browning wrote “Ah—but I didn’t see her smoke – I was unfortunate,” see Sullivan, 353.

to George Sand, whose birth name is Aurore Dupin (Radley, 81; Taplin XV). In an introduction to *Aurora Leigh*, Gardner Taplin also highlights that both the protagonist and the French author share similar transgressive values such as their inclination for art, recognition of the woman artist, awareness of social inequalities and justice, as well as a fundamental belief in the equality of the sexes (9).¹⁹ I will argue that Sand also played a part in Browning's questioning of the intricate connection between needlework and writing and maintain that a reading of *Histoire de ma vie* may well have helped fashion the theme and the heroine of *Aurora Leigh*. In December 1854, Barrett Browning shared her intention to read Sand's memoirs, which indeed suggests that the Victorian poet might have been familiar with the 1854 publication of *Histoire de ma vie* by the time she penned and published *Aurora Leigh* in 1856 (Sullivan, 423).²⁰

Aurora Leigh and Aurore Dupin: Finding a Voice Through the Art of Needlework.

What interests me most in *Aurora Leigh* is Barrett Browning's metaphor of writing and weaving textiles as a major theme in an epic-poem that was inspired by the French novelist. Unlike Sand, who praises the therapeutic benefits of women's needlework as "un attrait invincible," the poet undermines the power of needlework as leisure and art, which she finds physically and intellectually restricting (*Histoire de ma vie*, 1122). At the end of the *Aurora Leigh*'s first book, for example, while Aurora sews, crochets or knits, the

¹⁹ For George Sand's influence in the writing of *Aurora Leigh*, See Taplin, XV.

²⁰ *Histoire de ma vie* was first published in *La Presse* from October 1854 to August 1855, *Histoire de ma vie*, 36.

protagonist portrays herself as a “...thin/Pined body” executing “forced work” which altogether suggests a longing for physical mobility as much as freedom of thoughts through writing (36):

I sate and teased
The patient needle til it split the thread,
Which oozed off from it in meandering lace
From hour to hour. [...]
My soul was singing at a work apart
Behind the wall of sense...
(*Aurora Leigh*, 36) ²¹

In this excerpt, Aurora idealizes the process of writing as “a work apart” while she engages in needlework. These particular verses entail a metaphor *filée* of sewing as writing and conveys *une double entendre*: the thread breaks away from the needle as it embroiders fabric the same way ink splits from the tip of the nib and flows to inscribe words on the page. Barrett Browning’s metaphor of sewing as writing in *Aurora Leigh* celebrates both needlework and pen-work as analogous vehicles to craft a new vision of the world and to reestablish the place of women’s discourses in “Life and Art.”²² In her analysis of *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Erbeznik observes that the theme of needlework prevails as a metaphor within the plot and that the heroine “continues to find her voice in stitches” throughout the narration of her own story (620).

²¹ v.1049 to v.1060

²² As Elizabeth Barrett Browning puts it in the 1856 Preface to *Aurora Leigh*, 10.

Besides the similarities established by scholars between Aurora and George Sand, the reason I primarily juxtapose Aurora and Sand to my analysis of *Histoire de ma vie* is because both first-person narrators find their voice in stiches in their respective work and I suggest that Alexandre Manceau's agendas, which I previously discussed, reinforce the idea that needlework facilitated Sand's writing skills to self-fashion her autobiographical voice throughout the writing of *Histoire de ma vie*. Contrary to Mrs. Browning, Sand focuses on her literary career and hinders the theme of needlework. Elizabeth Barrett Browning emphasizes weaving as writing in a *metaphor filée* as a means to show that the habitual practice acquired from the needlework is memorized and serves as a drive for women to write. Yet Aurora renounces the task of sewing that she describes as "forced work" and idealizes writing as "a work apart/ Behind the walls of sense," which refers to the process of writing and exploring the world (36). Ultimately, Aurora Leigh travels from England to France and to Italy, like George Sand, as a means to find inspiration to write her book. The "work apart" that Aurora idealizes in the excerpts becomes reality since the heroine trades sewing for the writing of her own story. Unlike the weaving metaphor in *Aurora Leigh*, feminine needlework is modestly discussed in *Histoire de ma vie* as though it is identified as "a work apart."

Needlework : connecting women of various social class

Elizabeth's Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* shows that needlework connects women of various social status. What I find more intriguing is that the connection between Aurora and Marian Erle, who share noticeable similarities with George Sand and her mother, Sophie-Victoire-Antoinette Delaborde (1773-1837). Indeed, Sophie not only

played a significant role in Sand's artistic endeavors, curiosity and discovery but she also gifted her daughter with creativity and needlecraft.²³ Meanwhile, Aurora Leigh encounters Marian Erle, a working-class seamstress, who helps the heroine comprehend the city and its social dynamic so that Aurora "can evolve from city-writer to city-maker," as Erbeznik puts it (621).²⁴ While Aurora and Marian's friendship blossoms, writing and weaving intertwines in *Aurora Leigh*'s text as both female protagonists gradually craft a new vision of the city (619). In similar fashion to Sand and Sophie, Aurora Leigh and Marian consolidate a feminine and artistic bond in which the underprivileged working-class seamstress guides the educated upper-class woman-writer as a means to decode social problems and to transgress hegemonic powers. In her book, Katherine Sullivan explains that the history of weaving is a history of women's work and that needlework serves as an act of reclaiming female authorship (22). Because women connect on many levels through needlework, I assert that Sophie's weaving is an artistic activity that not only helped foster an intimate connection with her daughter, but it also served to reclaim the voice of the proletarian class, particularly through the writing process of *Histoire de ma vie*. Thanks to this feminine bond, both George Sand and Aurora Leigh have a better understanding of the world they live in and both are drawn closer to women's work.

²³ "Comme si ma mère avait eu une clé magique pour ouvrir mon esprit au sentiment inculte mais profond" see *Histoire de ma vie*, 589.

²⁴ I think this is important also when it comes to Sand and patchwork, where she crafts a new way of craft an autobiography in similar fashion to Aurora and Marian build a new vision of the world.

Needlework crafts a powerful family bond

The mother-daughter bond

Sewing and crafting established a strong mother-daughter bond during Sand's childhood, which subsequently served as a pivotal event in the author's understanding of social class. Like *Aurora Leigh*'s Marian, Sand's mother, Sophie-Victoire-Antoinette Delaborde, was a seamstress who worked as a *modiste* (a dressmaker), descended from a working-class family, traveled to Italy, and married a man from the upper-classes. In other words, just as Aurora Leigh' fictional character Marian married upper-class Rommer Leigh, Sand's mother Sophie marries Maurice Dupin.²⁵ Most importantly, Sophie's crafting and sewing abilities are specific skills that the author eulogizes and idealizes as an innate artistic talent in *Histoire de ma vie*:

Ma mère était une grande artiste manquée faute de developpement [...] elle avait pour tous les arts et pour tous les métiers une aptitude merveilleuse. Elle n'avait rien appris [...] en peu de jours elle fit une robe percale brodée toute entière de haute en bas [...] Elle faisait toutes nos robes et tous nos chapeaux [...] c'était inventé et exécuté avec une promptitude, un goût et une fraîcheur incomparable" (633).²⁶

²⁵ For the mother as dressmaker "Elle brodait un peu gros, mais avec une rapidité si incroyable qu'elle fit à ma grand-mère, en peu de jours, une robe de percale brodée tout entière du haut en bas [...]. Elle faisait toutes nos robes et tous nos chapeaux, ce qui n'était pas merveille, puisqu'elle avait été longtemps modiste" See *Histoire de ma vie* 632; Sand's father met Sophie in Asola Italie, "Ma mère était une pauvre enfant des pavés de Paris." See *Histoire de ma vie* 53.

²⁶ By developpement, Sand means a proper education since Sophie was une fille du peuple. See *Histoire de ma vie*, 632.

In this passage, the author demonstrates that her mother was self-educated and left to her own devices. As well, most of Sophie's domestic, creative and artistic abilities were acquired through observations. Unlike Sand's aristocratic grandmother Marie-Aurore de Saxe, Sophie was educated outside of the traditions which ultimately paved the way for introducing a new vision of the world to the future George Sand: "ma mère m'ouvrait instinctivement et tout naïvement le monde du beau ... comme si ma mère avait eu une clef magique pour ouvrir mon esprit au sentiment inculte" (*Histoire de ma vie*, 589).²⁷ This beautiful world – to which, metaphorically, only Sophie has access – represents an ideal that transgresses society's norms and standards, that is to say a desire for an infinite rather than a reality within which an absolute is delimited and constructed by hierarchy and homogenic language.

Additionally, Sand was mesmerized by Sophie's needlework skills. The autobiographical writing shows that Sophie's stitching and dressmaking established a special bond between young Sand and her mother. Indeed, Sand discusses extensively the positive relationship that she shared with her mother throughout her childhood. On the other hand, Sand explains that her mother "vivait dans une gêne voisine de la pauvreté avec ... un labeur domestiques digne d'une femme du peuple," but she also declares that Sophie played a significant role in raising awareness about the ill-fated poverty that engulfed women from the proletarian class: "Écoute, me dit-elle [Sophie], tu ne sais pas ce que c'est que la misère pour de jeunes filles ! moi, je le sais, ... je me suis trouvée orpheline et sans

²⁷ "Ma mère s'occupa de fort bonne heure de me développer." See *Histoire de ma vie*, 565.

pain à quatorze ans” (*Histoire de ma vie*, 767; 589). Hence, in similar fashion to Marian in *Aurora Leigh*, Sophie educated the future George Sand to perceive on the one hand the world beyond the scope of her paternal aristocratic heritage and on the other hand, to shape her vision from a proletarian point of view regarding social class disparity. This knowledge played a significant role in Sand’s curiosity as well as in her political engagement, specifically because Sand’s origins are, as the author phrases it in *Histoire de ma vie*, “à cheval [...] sur deux classes” (653). She perceives herself as “le résultat d’un mélange ou d’une parité de races et la continuation, toujours modifiée, d’une suite de types s’enchaînant les uns aux autres,” an admixture that the author thematizes through a constant hybridity in the text as a form of *métissage* (653; 60). As a result, I suggest that Sand lives between what Lionnet refers to as “the gaps” that is to say “à cheval” between the proletarian and the aristocratic class, but most importantly, she also stands as woman author who understands the concept of *métissage* and interweaves different social backgrounds, cultures and traditions. While Lionnet investigates how these voices challenge repressive ideological systems, my work examines the functions of regional dialect, oral traditions and clothing in Le Berry as a means to illustrate Sand’s strategic braiding of various linguistic-cultural threads.

Even though Sophie-Victoire-Antoinette Delaborde was forced to leave her daughter in the care of Sand’s wealthy grandmother who took over her education at the Nohant estate, Sand’s memories further detail that her nearly illiterate mother was always occupied with needlework and used her sewing skills to a practical end: “elle brodait un peu gros mais avec une rapidité incroyable” and “elle raccommodait nos nippes elle-même

... elle valait dix ouvrières à elle seule” (577; 632-633).²⁸ Thus, like Marian Erle, who cannot read or write but instead, excels at sewing and helped the upper-class heroine Aurora Leigh, Sophie established a bond with her daughter as she introduced the artistic and the utilitarian functions of needlework. Most importantly, Sophie facilitated her daughter’s comprehension of social dynamics in ways that her grandmother’s aristocratic education could not: as Sand explains, “ma mère et ma grand-mère, ces deux femmes différentes ... par leurs éducations et leurs habitudes. C’étaient vraiment les deux types extrêmes de notre sexe” (*Histoire de ma vie*, 632). As we will see in the second part of this chapter, Sand celebrates both needlework and pen-work as analogous vehicles to craft a new vision of the world and to reestablish the place of women’s discourses in “Life and Art.”

Concealing personal feelings: hiding the unwanted threads.

While Sophie influenced Sand’s creation of a new vision of the world outside of a powerful aristocratic class, weaving textiles constituted a crucial mother-daughter connection. Later in life, Sand shared her passion for needlework with her children, particularly Maurice with whom she custom made the puppets’ attires following the creation of *Le Théâtre de Nohant*.²⁹ In 1853 Sand declared her crafting activities and states: “Maurice, Lambert et moi, nous avons fait des costumes de marionnettes” (*Agendas*,

²⁸ Shortly after the death of Aurore’s father, Maurice Dupin de Francueil in 1808

²⁹ In one of her latest memoir published in 1873, Sand shares her surprise when she witnessed her son’s spontaneity to resort to a needle and threads in the middle of the wood in order to stitch the hole on his clothes: “j’apperçoit mon fils occupé à coudre. Quelle singulière idée, le troubleau avait un trou ... Il a son attirail complet, il fait une reprise et se met à la chasse en sueur.” See, *Impressions et souvenirs* 360.

tome 1, 144). As well, most of George Sand's daily entries in Manceau's agendas from 1852 to 1856 recorded that one of the habitual evening activities was the making of costumes for the theater's puppets.³⁰ After 1848, like Aurora Leigh, Sand found an increasingly complex voice in her novels through the process of stitching and long hours of embroidery, tapestry and costume-making that were evening rituals prior to a long night of writing.

Broken threads and broken bonds: Sand-Sophie forced separation.

Needlework occupied a significant and an intimate place in Sand's life and the practice was also akin to a series of family bonds: that of mother (Sophie) and daughter (and); that of mother (Sand) and son (Maurice); or even grandmother (Sand) and granddaughter, as Aurore Sand demonstrates in the lyrical poem *Marionnettes*. However, George Sand was separated from her mother while she was under her grandmother's tutelage, and the author suffered from her absence at a young age, in addition to her father's death in 1808. Later in life, Sand invested time into reconnecting a broken mother-daughter bond, but the effort resulted in a rocky mother-daughter relationship until Sophie passed away in 1837.³¹ Hence, I contend that one of the reasons Sand may have shied away from including details of her personal affinity for "travaux d'aiguilles" in her autobiographical writing was the pain of recollecting memories that triggered intimate sorrows. Concealing unwanted

³⁰ "costumes de marionnettes" is a daily activity in Nohant even when Sand received guests. See *Agendas*, Tome 1 (1852-1853) 151, 163, 321, 322 and 323.

³¹ As shown in her *Correspondence*: arguments with her mother who lived in Paris. Shows an unstable connection in which Sand feels disconnected.

distress is a process that I also observed in the manuscript of *Histoire de ma vie*. In fact, expressions that involve Sand's personal feelings were often euphemized in the pages of the manuscript either by substituting a word or by adding another adjective. In the introductory chapter, for instance, Sand struck out “souffrances” and replaced it with “agitations.” A few pages later, the adjective “grave” is erased in the expression “quelque grave souffrance” as the author swapped it for “vive” (Illustration 4).³² Hence, the manuscript shows a pattern regarding Sand's tendency to conceal certain emotional aspects of her personal state of being, which is also a trait that resurfaces regarding women's kinship to needlework.

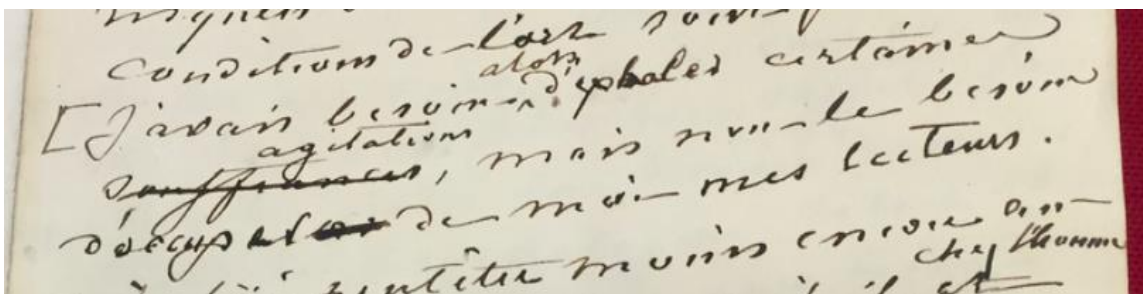
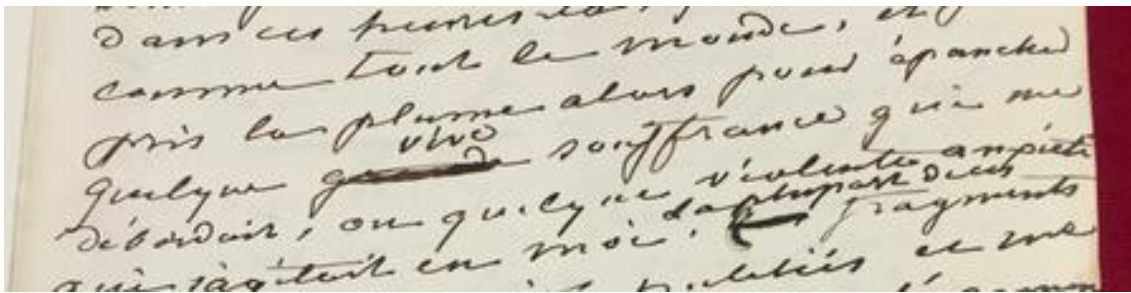


Illustration 4: *Histoire de ma vie* Part 1, Chap 1 (page 9 & 10) manuscript Bibliothèque Nationale Française.

³² “j’ai pris la plume alors pour épancher quelque vive souffrance qui me débordait” and “j’avais besoin d’exhaler certaines agitations, mais non le besoin d’occuper de moi mes lecteurs” (*Histoire de ma vie*, 45).

I suggest that Sand tends to attenuate her most acute emotions in her autobiography, and as a result, she alters the textual interpretation of the reader. Accordingly, a distance emerges between Sand's emotional state of being and the one she portrays in her writing. In her study of *Histoire de ma vie*, Janet Hiddleston explains that Sand omits feelings of joy and pain, such as emotions associated with motherhood, because both convey a psychological state of being that is "at odds with the male tradition within which she was writing" (27). Like the joy and pain connected to motherhood, dressmaking, weaving, making tapestry, and stitching are embedded in women's domestic traditions and therefore at odds with the male tradition within which Sand was writing her own story. In similar fashion to the patchwork practice, Sand cuts or hides specific words of the text on paper the same ways she would conceal the unwanted threads (or the extra edges of the fabric) by tucking them in and/or adding a thread of a different color in ways that alters the original design.

I contend that Sand felt the male autobiographical tradition to be at odds with an open discussion of her emotional state of being during birth as well as her passion for women's pursuits, such as needlework and clothes making for puppets which resulted in the author's circumvention of the topic by disguising and concealing such practices in *Histoire de ma vie*. However, I further claim that even though Sand follows the male autobiographical traditions within which she was writing and entered in dialogue with, she reclaims her female authorship by transgressing the form and content of the autobiographical novel thanks to her knowledge, practice and mastering of artistic needlework. Even though Sand disguised the subject of needlework in her writing, Sand

was passionate for *les travaux d'aiguille* and she mastered different techniques. Therefore, I assert that the technique of needlework reappears in the form and content of *Histoire de ma vie* in a non-written form which, I claim, resembles an artistic patchwork quilt.

Cutting stitches : withdrawing her personal interest for needlework

Though *Histoire de ma vie* consists of five volumes that count fifteen hundred pages, the author summarizes her passion for craftwork and needlework in just few sentences: “Par goût, je n’aurais pas choisi la profession littéraire, [...] J’aurais voulu vivre du travail de mes mains” (1259). Sand claims that she discovered her passion for sewing in 1822 while she was expecting her first child. She first crafted hats for her son Maurice, but she only managed to sew two or three because, as she emphasizes in *Histoire de ma vie*, her limited vision hindered her ability to sew: “Je ne distingue pas les petits objets; et compter les fils de mousseline, lire les caractères fins, regarder de près, en un mot, est une souffrance qui donne des vertiges et qui m’enfoncent milles épingles au fond du crâne” (1122). Yet, Manceau’s agendas prove a different truth and poor vision did not interfere with the creation of an extensive needlework collection. However, Sand praises the general benefits of needlework as a leisure in a brief digression: “J’ai toujours aimé le travail d’aiguille, et c’est pour moi une récréation où je me passionne quelquefois jusqu’à la fièvre” (1121).³³ Even though the author’s digression on needlework further describes this

³³ In a letter to Ferri-Passani in Paris in October 21, 1858 Sand Sand says, “..en terminant mon étude de fleurs au gros points.“ ..j’ai commencé ce travail (un pouf) avec l’intention de l’offrir au prince (Napoléon) [...] Veuillez dire à Son Altesse, en lui faisant agréer mon travail d’aiguille, que j’ai fait tous ces points en pensent à lui et aux femmes de mes pauvres exiles dont il a séché les larmes. See, *Correspondence IV*, Lubin Edition, 172.

tedious leisure activity as therapeutic, the words “vertiges,” “souffrance” and “fièvre” connote an inner sense of ill-feeling and malaise. Contrasting Sand’s abrupt circumvention of “les travaux d’aiguille” in *Histoire de ma vie* with the facts in Manceau’s agendas along with Sand’s *Correspondence*, I contend that there exists a correlation between the increase of needlework projects post-1848 and its therapeutic function. By this I mean that needlework slowly helped Sand heal from pain to find some autonomy and freedom which played a significant role in the self-fashioning of her autobiography as well as in reshaping her identity as a woman writer.

1847-1856: the pivotal years to self-fashioning an autobiographical identity and creating artistic needlework

From 1847 to 1849, George Sand experienced tensions, loss and grief in various areas of her life, whereas 1850 marked a personal search for revival and peace not only as an author but also as an artist. It is essential to list the challenges that the woman-author had to face from 1847 to 1849 in order to frame and to understand what drove Sand to write the story of her life.

The first period of turmoil began in 1847 when her daughter Solange married Jean-Baptiste Clésinger, whose financial debts and mercurial temper resulted in a family conflict, including a brief fist fight between Clésinger and Sand. Next, her nine-year romance with Chopin ended due to the close relationship that blossomed between Chopin and Solange. This event not only left Sand feeling betrayed, but it also caused a rupture

between Sand and her daughter (Jensen, 41).³⁴ The following year, Sand had to first overcome grief after the tragic loss of her close friend Marie Dorval, then that of her half-brother Hippolyte Chatiron (Pierre Laverdure) and last but not least, the death of Frederic Chopin in October 1848. Two months later, Sand revealed her financial struggles while she awaited the publication of *Histoire de ma vie*: “Je ne veux pas désespérer, mais je depends d’un éditeur qui me devra une quarantaine de mille francs [...] avec beaucoup de manuscripts dans les mains [...] je n’ai pas un sou dans la poche et je vis au jour le jour avec mon petit revenu de Nohant” (*Correspondence* VIII, 726). This financial pressure and sorrow deepened with the Revolution of 1848 and the fall of the democratic party in which Sand placed great hope. French society of the period was dangerously divided and the 1848 Revolution was primarily about “the order of society” and “the battle of classes” (Terdiman, 706). Despite the various obstacles, Sand not only found refuge at Nohant, where she focused on work and domestic life, but this time frame also marks a phase of artistic and literary development during which the woman author produced three of her most renowned and critically acclaimed rustic novels: *La Mare au diable* (1846), *François le Champi* (1848) and *La Petite Fadette* (1849).³⁵ The series of pastoral tales constitute what Isabelle Naginski identifies as “la période verte” (1840-1853) of Sand’s lengthy career (5). These challenging events, I contend, served as a platform for creativity during

³⁴ Sand discovered Chopin’s passion for her daughter Solange since the pair grew closer. Sand’s belief in this betrayal ended her relationship with Chopin during the summer of 1847, See Jensen, 49.

³⁵ In October 1848, Sand tells Pierre Jules Hetzel that “Nohant est un refuge contre tout.” See *Correspondence* VIII, 643.

which Sand experimented with a new textual fabric that flourished with the rustic novel *Jeanne*.

Self-fashioning a new “type” from 1844 *Jeanne* to *Histoire de ma vie*

Building on Isabelle Naginski’s book *George Sand: Writing for Her Life* and her research on the author’s rustic novels penned from 1840 to 1853, I argue that Sand experiments with a new rustic textual fabric in *Jeanne* and that this step is crucial to the development of *Histoire de ma vie*. In fact, the 1852 edited and illustrated version of *Jeanne* includes a preface in which Sand stressed that the 1844 *Jeanne* was a prelude to *le roman champêtre* series which comprises *La Mare au diable* (1846), *François le Champi* (1848) and *La Petite Fadette* (1849) (30). Along with this “première tentative,” as Sand puts it, the author self-criticizes her narrative faux-pas and recounts her struggles to fashion the female protagonist in 1844. Naginski interprets this discomfort as a barrier between form and content, particularly between modern language and the world Sand tries to portray (265). Yet, I contend that Sand’s description of the heroine intends to go beyond the feminine portrait of the modern woman and that of a simple peasant girl as Sand reveals that Jeanne “est autre, et appartient à un autre genre de description” (*Jeanne*, 30; 31). As a result, I claim that the heroine conveys hybridity as a female protagonist, or as Sand’s metaphor suggests in her attempt to depict *Jeanne*’s literary genre: “Il me semblait que [...] je profanais le nu antique avec des draperies modernes” (31). Therefore, I propose that *Jeanne*, as well as the heroine Jeanne, both convey a state of “in between” that hovers between modernity and the archaic.

Jeanne's preface proves that the author investigates her writing style with a new "type" of character --a term she reiterates four times in *Jeanne*'s preface in 1852-- while she searches for the missing link that allows individuals to see beyond the boundaries of their own existence, starting with how each individual, modern and archaic, not only contributes to the community but also partakes in the history of a country. I suggest that the preface to *Jeanne* in 1852 also confirms that Sand, who was writing *Histoire de ma vie* concurrently at the time, not only reevaluates the "type" of fictional heroine she created but she also contrasts two opposite poles, "le nu antique" and "les draperies modernes," as a means to explore the possibilities of harmony between authenticity and artifice, which are also in constant tension between fiction and autobiography in *Histoire de ma vie* in terms of genre.

Tearing fabric: undoing text and textiles

Ruptures, separations, divides and heartbreak between 1847 and 1849 brought an atmosphere of disarray and emptiness for the woman author prior to the autobiographical journey. In October 1848, her letter to editor Pierre-Jules Hetzel declares "Je travaille à mes mémoires avec une grande activité. C'est la seule distraction que je trouve à ma tristesse" (*Correspondence VIII*, 642). The feeling of being torn is, according to Judy Elsley, who conducted research on the semiotics of patchwork quilts, a common experience in women's lives. As a consequence, a woman's decision to tear and to cut, whether it is literal, in the act of piecing for patchwork, or figurative, as a means to find autonomy after a physical or emotional wound, seems to be a singularly appropriate trope for women trying

to begin a new chapter of their lives (4). Most importantly, cutting is a crucial step prior to reassembling fragments of writing to tell a story as much as gathering pieces of cloth for a patchwork quilt. It is during this period of sorrow and heartbreaks that George Sand initiated the process of collecting, assembling, and ultimately abridging the letters that her father, her grandmother and her mother exchanged prior to her birth in 1804 (Bochenek-Franczakowa, 129). In fact, Sand selected specific letters and handwrote fragments of this correspondence with the goal to include them in the first and second volume of *Histoire de ma vie*'s manuscript (130).

Undoing the autobiographical male model

Sand figuratively *tore* the original letters by cutting parts of the written text. In her *Correspondence*, she admits that, “Il y avait longtemps que je voulais publier ces lettres, en retranchant les longueurs, les redites [...] ou les confidences trop intimes. C’est un travail d’attention et de choix. Je retire la moelle de l’os pour ainsi dire” (*Correspondence*, VIII, 239). The verbs “retrancher” and “retirer” both mean to separate a part from the whole and as a result, I will show that woman-author takes away pieces of textual fabric, just like a quilter cuts clothing fabric, to rearrange the fragments (text and textiles) to give form to her own vision. In other words, Sand self-fashions the narrative of the epistolary segment of *Histoire de ma vie* by shifting, inserting and arranging the letters that she selected. The decision to alter the authenticity of the letters by extracting information prior to inserting them in the autobiographical manuscript is a choice that not only gives the author agency over the archives, the information and the legacy of her family, but it is also

an act of displacement that Sand gives control over authority (her aristocratic grandmother), patriarchy (her father) and hierarchy (her mother from proletarian class).

The end of 1849 was a period of resurrection for Sand, thanks to the theatrical success of *François le Champi* and to her healthy relationship with Alexandre Manceau. In 1850, Sand enjoyed “la passion en pantoufle” as Jean Chalon puts it and in one of her letters to Hentzel, she declares “Je suis transformée, je me porte bien, je suis heureuse” (Chalon, 319). Hence, she appreciates the serenity of domestic life in Nohant and in 1850 tells Pierre Bocage that, thanks to this transformation, once again “Je veux faire de l’art. On peut toujours se passer d’argent et de succes quand on se sent artiste pour de bon” (318).

After 1853, Sand also contributed to Manceau’s agendas and her entries detailed specific types and purposes behind each needlework project, from stitching rags to making costumes, mending dresses, embroidering shawls and making tapestry for chairs, sofas and fashion dresses for dolls in 1850s style. Besides such diversity of needlecraft, Sand also had an inclination for exotic fabrics and designs, which leads me to suggest her preference for hybrid needlework styles like that of a patchwork in *Histoire de ma vie*. In June 1852, for instance, Sand sent a letter to her friend Sophie Fisher in which she requested supplies for the tapestry she wished to begin and specifically asked for non-traditional designs such as “les jolis dessins, imités du chinois, de l’indien, et dans des tons qui ne sont pas usités” (*Correspondances XI*, 200). With regards to artistic work or crafts, Sand does not follow conventional styles; instead, she is driven by a *métissage* of fabrics and designs that convey a hybrid collage and assemblage.

Sand's preference for colors and patterns that deviate from the norms is, in fact, a search for a *métissage* of colored fabric and it transpires in her autobiographical writing style (an argument that I will revisit in the second part). In the public eye and literary circle, Sand was infamous for transgressing the norms in her daily life as much as in her work, but few were aware of her needlework skills. Only the woman author's friends,³⁶ family and recipients of her correspondence remain to acknowledge that Sand was a master of sewing, stitching, embroidery, and tapestry.³⁷ As noted above, despite a prompt digression that explains the universal therapeutic benefits of needlework as women's leisure, *Histoire de ma vie* conceals the extent of Sand's private needlework production and collection (1122).³⁸ Assuming a role in the public sphere as an author remained challenging for women, who were, like Aurore Dupin, frequently forced to mask their gender, either by collaborating with male authors or publishing under a pen name. Therefore, representing one's true self as a woman brought many obstacles in literature. Rose Fortassier indicates that "les femmes-écrivains se sont souvent refusées à parler de ces chiffons, qui les enfermaient dans un rôle dont elles ne voulaient plus" and I believe that Sand hides her passion for needlework for the same reasons (10).

³⁶ In a letter to Nadar, dated December 7th 1853, Manceau writes: "Elle [George Sand] vit retirée à la campagne ne voyant que ses amis et pas le monde qu'elle n'aime point. Elle se lève assez tard, déjeune, fait du jardinage avec passion, écrit, dine, passe ses soirées au salon, en famille à broder, remonte chez elle, et travail habituellement jusqu'au petit jour" See, *Correspondence XII* 185

³⁷ On January 30 1853, in her letter to MC Devernet, Sand reports her the activities in the living room including "la tapisserie pendant laquelle Manceau me fait la lecture de quelques romans, Nini, assise sur la table, brochant aussi." See *Correspondence XI*, 362.

³⁸ "Je fus bien étonnée de voir combien c'était facile; mais en même temps je compris que là, comme dans tout, il pouvait y avoir l'invention et la *maestria* du coup de ciseau." (*Histoire de ma vie*, 1121).

Instead, Sand assigns a specific new role and significance to the clothes and fabric women chose to wear as a means to maneuver beyond the constructed limits of the oppressive French patriarchal system. Cloth and textiles convey a way of communicating a central problem of power and of subverting norms. Sand's art of *filer le mot* and representation of clothing, specifically in *Jeanne* and *Histoire de ma vie*, make way for a fashion statement. Stendhal contemptuously labelled Sand as "une marchande de modes," and yet, critics like Rose Fortassier observed that Sand did not scrutinize clothes of her era, but rather described clothes that specifically belonged to "un autre siècle, ou les paysans," and that Sand's "rares romans parisiens ne nous conduisent guère dans le monde où l'on s'habille" (11). I agree that Sand's various novels such as *Consuelo*, *La comtesse de Rudolstadt*, *Mauprat*, *Indiana* and *Lélia* to list a few, usually distance themselves from Parisian fashion since they introduce a nonconformist, picturesque, foreign and liberated image of women's fashion. In contrast, I will demonstrate that cloth, textiles and needlework transpire in the very structure as well as the content of Sand's autobiography in a non-verbal form and played a pivotal role in Sand's construction of her identity as a woman author who defied the liminalities of the social and the political structure.

WEAVING THE PATCHWORK QUILT : FORM, FUNCTION AND CONTENT IN *HISTOIRE DE MA VIE*

In this part, I will demonstrate how the format and the autobiographical content, which Sand respectively refers to as *la forme* and *le fond*, equally transgress the male autobiographical model as Sand both applies what I am calling the artistic technique of a

patchwork-quilt aesthetic and subsequently disguises it within the narrative. In 1847, Sand claims that she already received publication offers for her “histoire de moi ... dans une forme” that she wishes to keep secret (*Correspondence VIII*, 114-115). Additionally, the woman author declares “Je ne fais point ici un ouvrage d’art, je m’en defends même, car ces choses ne valent que par la spontanéité et l’abandon, et je ne voudrais pas raconter ma vie comme un roman. La forme en emporterait le fond” (*Histoire de ma vie*, 51). My goal is to show that *Histoire de ma vie* is in fact “un ouvrage d’art” in disguise and follows the same idea of mobility, plurality of voices and fluidity of identity as the method to assemble a patchwork quilt. I will further argue that Sand deliberately dislocates the autobiographical narrative “I” and fragments the narrative structure in ways that connect, metaphorically, text and textiles and create ways for the woman author to give voice to the female-artist.

Patchwork quilt as a form of *métissage*

Stenterello: a patchwork portrait of a historical protagonist.

Patchwork and quilts were the most popular in the homes of North American and Victorian women during the nineteenth century, but George Sand showed great familiarity with its needlework techniques. In fact, the archives show that Sand used the patchwork quilt technique to craft the top part of a pillow case whose finished design portrays Florentine Stenterello, an Italian character from *La commedia dell’arte* (Illustration 5). Sand was inspired by one of her son’s earlier drawings of Stenterello, a character who is also an illustration in Maurice Sand’s 1858 novel *Masque de bouffon* (1858). The

description of the pillow stresses that each piece of fabric was selected from a different-colored cloth before being stitched and assembled on the blue background to form the top part of the pillow.³⁹ Additionally, Sand respects the traditional costume of the character depicted by Maurice Sand in *The history of the harlequinade* (published posthumously in 1915), in which Stenterello is portrayed as “addicted to violent colours,” wearing “a pale blue coat, yellow waistcoat, a pair of breeches that are black [...] His cotton stockings, one of which is red, the other striped blue and white, are stretched upon slightly knock-kneed legs” (93).⁴⁰ Sand’s *collage* of colorful fabrics conveys the author’s dexterity and mastery of a needlework technique that collects, measures, cuts, assembles and crafts by stitching pieces of cloth to transform a drawing into a needle artwork that ultimately stays true to the characteristics of the historical Italian protagonist. In the part that follows, I will discuss how Sand similarly patched together the story of her life in writing.

³⁹ Description next to the pillow in display at Musée George Sand in La Chatre, Fonds Patrimoniaux Ville de la Chatre. Description was written by Francois Huetas and Huppé; Direction Technique by Evelyne Langellier Bellevue; Printing Pozzos Gros Monti (Italie); Composition by Anthony Emprintes and Photogravure by ENG, Paris

⁴⁰ Maurice Sand wrote *The history of the harlequinade* later translated and published in 1915. In this book, Sand’s son give a moral and physical description of every type of character from *la commedia dell’arte*



Illustration 5: Stenterello, pillow top in a form of patchwork created by George Sand and found on the living room couch in Nohant (Musée George Sand in La Châtre, Resource, no. 319).

From Lionnet's concept of métissage: weaving the word in patchwork quilt and hybridity

Finding an accurate definition for *patchwork quilt* suggests some ambiguity. Unlike the set categories of needlework such as embroidery, weaving or knitting, a variety of names exist for *patchwork quilting* depending on the country, the region and the culture. The description of Stenterello for instance, labels the form of Sand's needlework as a "broderie", then "appliqué", or "couture sur un morceau de tissu" and ultimately, "kilt et patchwork"; the description, moreover, explains the multicultural origins of such needlework art from "les fermières américaines du dix-neuvième siècle" to a type of sewing "découverts dans les tombes chinoises 1050 av. JC" (Source from Musée George Sand in La Châtre France).⁴¹ Patchwork quilts experts such as Mary D. Webster and Katheryn Ledbetter explore the variety in the patchwork quilt genre and declare that quilts, counterpanes, crazy patchwork, strip quilts, pieced quilts and patched quilts along with the French "appliqué" or *contrepoin*te, all fall under the same category of needlework methods that implies "two or more fabrics held together with many stitches" and "an inner lining of wadding/batting" (Webster, 90-91). Thus, I posit that blurring the genres is a phenomenon that applies to the making of both a patchwork quilt and Sand's *Histoire de ma vie*, specifically in terms of form, function and content as I will further discuss in this part.

⁴¹ Museum of La Châtre resource No 319. Mises en pages Hervé Huertas pour Huppé. Composition: Empreintes Antony. Direction technique: Evelyne Langellier Bellevue

The autobiographical structure: form and functions of the patchwork quilt inscribed in *Histoire de ma vie*. *

The purpose of making a patchwork quilt shares some symbolic features with that of writing *Histoire de ma vie*. Most patchwork quilts find their place within the privacy of a family home and serve as bed covers as well as wedding gifts for newlyweds (Ledbetter, 50). Autobiographies are similarly set within the private sphere of the author's life and often represent a family's legacy. While a finished patchwork quilt is passed on to the next generation, Sand's *Histoire de ma vie* follows the same motives after the Revolution of 1848 during which the French social classes struggled for their preservation and the future of the next generations. The patriotic values of a region or a nation are also inscribed in certain types of patchwork quilts, flags, and banners by piecing political colors, escutcheons along with cultural symbols; French patriotism is concurrently a major theme that intertwines with Sand's story. In the first and the second volumes of *Histoire de ma vie*, for instance, Sand dedicates twenty-four chapters to establishing her family's autobiography within the historical and political context (84-562). She specifically highlights the military engagements of her great grand-father, *Le maréchal de Saxe*, whose campaigns for France appeared in historical books such as Henry Martin's *History of France*⁴² (*Histoire de ma vie*, 182). Hence, Sand's transcription of the le Maréchal de Saxe's letters is, on the one hand, an act of expressing patriotism, and on the other an assertion of Sand's decision to regain authority over the origins of her paternal heritage and family legacy.

⁴² Henri Martin's *Histoire de France depuis les temps les plus reculées jusqu'en 1789* published between 1

I contend that *Histoire de ma vie* is a third type of autobiography, that is to say a *métissage* of the masculine model (St Augustin, Montaigne, Rousseau, Chateaubriand) intermingled with artistic needlecraft mastered skills, practice and knowledge in ways that disrupt, displace and challenge phallogentric autobiographical narratives of nineteenth-century France. The form and function of *Histoire de ma vie* move beyond the limits of the autobiographical pact/model imposed by patriarchy because Sand blurs the boundaries of genre and gender. Indeed, a patchwork quilter finds freedom in arranging her pieces of fabric in ways that let her creativity come into existence; it is a place of liminalities, a “site of indeterminacy” as Françoise Lionnet posits, where the author customizes her own identity without the restraint of a particular needlework type or literary genre. Furthermore, *Histoire de ma vie* is neither feminine nor masculine but a hybrid creation that connects both through writing the words and artistic needlework model.

Marketing the self in a male-dominated literary sphere, inscribing the self in the collective

The final autobiographical title choice, *Histoire de ma vie*, challenges Sand’s contemporaries with a sense of irony and evidences the woman author’s desire to construct and to market her own image. In her *Correspondence*, she refers to her autobiographical project as “histoire de moi,” then “mes Mémoires,” to ultimately settled for “*Histoire de ma vie*” in December 1847 (*Correspondence VIII* 114; 119; 188). The singularity of the autobiographical title, *Histoire de ma vie* sets a unique counter-model to male autobiographical title traditions such as Rousseau’s *Les confessions*, Chateaubriand’s *Mémoires d’outre-tombes*, Saint-Augustine’s *Confessions* and De Musset’s *Confessions*

d'un enfant du siècle. Yet, choosing *Histoire de ma vie* as a title also confirms Sand's commitment to inscribe herself in the collective conversation of the day. In fact, 1847 shows a pool of publications entitled "*Histoire de...*" dominated by male authors: Lamartine's *Histoire des girondins*, Louis Blanc's *Histoire des dix ans 1830-1840*, Euquinole's *Histoire des Montagnards*, La Vallée's *Histoire des français jusqu'en 1830*, and Thiers' *Histoire du Consulat et de l'Empire* to list a few, some of which were published in volumes throughout the following years such as Jules Michelet's *Histoire de la révolution française* published from 1847 to 1853.⁴³ Additionally, Delatouche's final contract even stressed that "*Histoire de ma vie* devra renfermer une matière égale à celle du contenue dans cinq volumes de *l'Histoire des girondins* par Mr. de Lamartine" (*Correspondence*, VIII 202). Yet while most of the male authors in 1847 wrote about French, regional, and political history, George Sand assembled the history of her own life in five parts for which she also negotiated the price.

In 1847, George Sand was in deep in debt and envisioned *Histoire de ma vie* as a way to help regain financial stability for her family. Like a patchwork quilt for which needle workers are paid by the thread, Sand was similarly paid by the page.⁴⁴ The title choice of Sand's autobiography not only transgresses the norms of contemporary publications by deviating from the established parameters of subject matter, the woman author further challenges authorial standards by negotiating the best offer with publishers

⁴³ Additionally, the author's sense of humor transpires in the content's disproportionate organization the audience must go through one-third of the book, which recounts the story of family ancestry and entails her family correspondence, to finally arrive George Sand's first memory and life.

⁴⁴ Letter from Sand to Hetzel. See *Correspondence VIII*, 114-116.

such as Emmanuel Arago, Buloz, and Pierre-Jules Hetzel. In fact, she requests 7000 francs per volume from Arago while Buloz only offered 5000 francs. Eventually, the financial negotiation for *Histoire de ma vie* was settled for 7000 francs per volume and Sand bargained the monetary value of her autobiographical work in similar fashion to the quilter who is paid by the number of threads rather than the time invested on the particular project (Webster, 107). While the woman author penned *Histoire de ma vie*, she also meticulously calculated the pages of each chapter per volume the same way a quilter gathers, measures and cuts pieces of fabrics before stitching the patches. In her *Correspondence*, Sand explains that:

Mes volumes contiennent, presque rigoureusement [...] 250 pages de mon écriture, c'est à dire un in-8eme bien rempli, c'est à dire 7 feuilles du format grand in-8eme de la *Revue des Deux Mondes* [...] je crois donc qu'en demandant 1000 f. par feuille ou 7000 par volume, je ne demande pas trop. (*Correspondence VIII*, 111)⁴⁵

Hence, the autobiographer anticipates the length of the chapters per volume by controlling the page production. The manuscript showed evidence of the author's page count on the back side of the paper at the end of each chapter and one can read Sand's handwritten calculations: $18 \times 16 / 108 + 18 / 288$ (manuscript, page number). Because George Sand writes on the front side of each page and leaves its back blank, it is possible for the author to shuffle the parts of a chapter, in order to reconfigure and to control its content along with its length.

⁴⁵ Sand's letter to Emmanuel Arrago was written in November 1847 while the woman author was gathering information for her autobiographical project. See *Correspondence VIII* 11.

The author finds mobility within the work by adding chapters or pages in similar fashion to a quilter who selects the colors of the patches and rearranges them before finally assembling the patchwork.⁴⁶ In her *Correspondence* the author tells Eugenie Duvernet, who is one of the first readers of *Histoire de ma vie*, not to shuffle the pages of the volume because she has yet to number them (VIII, 262).⁴⁷ According to Ledbetter, the choice of colors and fabrics as well as a clever placement of each patch contrasts to create a striking effect (54), the juxtaposition of the disparate parts contributing to the greater effect of the whole. As I consulted the manuscript, I noticed that Sand cut pieces of papers that she glued onto a page or the text to either cover or add to her writing (manuscript). Equivalently, a quilter adds a design to cover a damaged patch (a technique of *appliqué*) which in my opinion, resembles Sand's manipulation of paper as a means to find autonomy in the creative process.

Paralleling text and textiles in my analysis of *Histoire de ma vie* brings to light the author's artistic skills within the written work. In *Histoire de ma vie*, Sand compares men's and women's literary work and states that women will always be more artistic and poetic in their life the way men will always be in their work (1207).⁴⁸ While she discusses the differences between men's and women's artistic skills, it is important to note that the content and the form of *Histoire de ma vie* constantly fluctuates between both genders

⁴⁶ For example she adds the chapter on le Marechal de Saxe as a response to critics and audience. See *Histoire de ma vie*, 188

⁴⁷ In *Correspondence* Sand's letter to Eugenie Duvernet: "Aie la bonté de me pas déranger les feuillets car le volume n'est pas encore numéroté." (janvier 1848)(262)

⁴⁸ "La femme sera toujours plus artiste et plus poète dans la vie, l'homme le sera toujours plus dans son oeuvre, See *Histoire de ma vie*, 1207.

which, I posit, is another step in the self-fashioning of a third type of autobiography. Isabelle Naginski explains that Sand's writing is "the complex construction of her androgynous literary persona and identity (*George Sand Writing for Her Life*, 17). Above all, I show that the ultimate goal in publishing an autobiographical piece at forty-four years of age proves that Sand's artistic and poetic skills are both gathered in her work as much as in her life and challenges phallogocentric discourse.

Layers of Patchwork Quilt and Autobiographical Layers

Patchwork quilting is one of the most complicated form of needlework and requires a high level of skills since, as Ledbetter explains, it involves various techniques such as sewing, embroidery, and tapestry, all of which were mastered by George Sand after 1848 as we have seen confirmed in her *Correspondances* and Manceau's agendas (28). In "Piecing and Writing" Elaine Showalter demonstrates that the fundamental technique of patchwork consists in juxtaposing and sewing two pieces (or more) of fabric of different colors together so that they form a pattern or an artistic design that ranges from a plain and basic to a fanciful and complex design. A patch represents one design unit. Making a patchwork is joining all the design units into a finished overall design (207). Once all the patches are assembled, they are stitched onto a heavy backing; this process is called quilting (Fons, 15). Achieving this metaphoric process of patchwork quilting takes two forms in Sand's autobiography: the first method is applied to the textual content (which I discuss in the part on challenging the male model) and the second, that of piecing/patching, takes place within the pages of the physical book, that is to say the manuscript and the different

editions in which the author cuts parts and adds a patch to correct her paragraph as we have discussed. I will ultimately show how Sand structures the text of *Histoire de ma vie* as a specific patchwork form called “the crazy quilt” whose name derived from crazed glass or crazed ice aesthetic and its design was inspired by Japanese patchwork artistry.

I find two ways of reading the organization of *Histoire de ma vie* as a constructed patchwork, but in order to understand this juxtaposition between text and textiles, it is important to know that the basic structure of a *patchwork quilt* is composed of three parts: the top, the interlining and the lining of the back (Webster, 89). First, the top layer forms the patchwork design and consists of the most colorful, creative and complex pieces of a *patchwork quilt*. Next, the interlining represents the layer of wadding/batting sandwiched in the middle. The interlining serves as a space between the top and the back lining that is stuffed with wool cotton or other soft materials. Thirdly, the back lining, also called ‘the quilt’ undertakes the role of a plain looking frame because it is stitched (quilted) to the top layer of the patchwork (Webster, 98). In this sense, the fundamental structure of a *patchwork quilt* resembles that of a physical book in which the top layer (patchwork) stands for the cover of a book, the lining of the back (quilt) represents the back cover and ultimately, the interlining symbolizes the pages of a book that are essential for the content as the substance of the book .

Because Sand wrote the introductory chapter in 1847, I associate the shortest part as the back lining of the patchwork quilt, that is to say the quilt section because its function

serves as a foundation to the finished product.⁴⁹ The quilt is a foundation that Webster calls “the frame” because it conveys a support for the patchwork and the interlining, that is to say the epistolary portion and the complex narrative of the author’s life (Webster, 50). Next, the epistolary portion regroups Sand’s family correspondence and serves as wadding/batting in which the voice of the author is barely present. Lastly, the patchwork layer: the third, longest and most diverse component of the book as it narrates Sand’s story from her childhood and starts in the middle of the second volume with Sand’s narrative voice “Quoi qu’il en soit, voici le premier souvenir de ma vie” (564).

Ultimately, the general organization of the autobiographical content is, I argue, a patchwork. While *Histoire de ma vie* splits into five volumes, I observe that each volume is divided into chapters whose length follows a regular pattern of fifteen to twenty-five pages. Comparing *Histoire de ma vie* to a patchwork allows us to interpret each chapter as a patch, or as a specific design unit, of equal size (more or less) that is interconnected to the next patch through contrast as well as similarity. Therefore, Sand writes her autobiography strategically by joining all the patches into a finished overall design. On the one hand, the patchwork structure voices the interconnectedness between people and emphasizes a unity, which is an argument that the author repeats twice in *Histoire de ma vie*, first in 1848 and later in 1854: “Comme nous sommes tous solidaires, il n’y a point de faute isolée. Il n’y a point d’erreur dont quelqu’un ne soit la cause ou le complice, et il est impossible de s’accuser sans accuser le prochain.” (*Histoire de ma vie*, 50; 1195). This

⁴⁹ See *Correspondence VIII* (November 1847) 240.

quotation not only confirms that Sand's philosophy stays constant throughout the project despite the gap of the chronological timeline, but also suggests that the idea of what I am calling her patchwork design comes to life through the idea of solidarity. On the other hand, Sand depicts her understanding of the human mind which she envisions in a metaphor: "Notre esprit est une boîte a compartiments qui communiquent les uns avec les autres par un admirable mécanisme" (1325). Hence, *Histoire de ma vie* stresses the importance of solidarity through a *metaphor filée* of a patchwork and whose technique resembles that of mosaic art.

Patchwork as mosaic art: a form of métissage

The quality of the patchwork quilt varies depending on the maker's artistic skills. In nineteenth-century France, the process of putting together a patchwork quilt is known as *une mosaïque*. The weaving method follows an antique wall decorating tradition that assembles colorful pieces of glass or tile to create an artistic image. In an illustrated French handbook published in 1865, Agnès Verboom's instructions praise the singularity of *mosaïque* needlework, particularly the hybridity of the fabric's texture and colors along with a penchant for exoticness: "On emploie toute sorte d'étoffes de soie, de fantaisie, de laine, de velours; les morceaux de ruban, les indiennes et la perse" (64-65). Consequently, a *mosaïque* made of fabric is a patchwork quilt that closely resembles the technique of mosaic art for which Sand also showed a strong inclination. Indeed, by the time she penned *Histoire de ma vie*, Sand had already published *Les Maîtres mosaïtes* in 1838 and a second edition of the historic novel was republished in 1852. Henri Lavagne characterizes the

historical novel as a work apart since it is the only book ever written on mosaic art in French literature.⁵⁰ Hence, mosaic art, French *mosaïque* and patchwork quilts all share the same characteristic that convey a *métissage* of colored units with the means to fashion an overall design.

In the fifth volume of *Histoire de ma vie*, written between 1853 and 1854, Sand portrays herself as a mosaic as she shares a dream she experienced during one of her trips to Italy. In this dream, she envisions herself morphing into a mosaic: “la nuit, je rêvais que je devenais mosaïque et je comptais attentivement mes petits carrés de lapis et de jaspé (1350). This episode demonstrates that the author’s sense of fragmentation, manifesting her subconscious loss of a sense of self, floating between reality and fiction, but she also embodies an abstract and ultimately synthesized form as a mosaic portrait. I contend that this important reference to the mosaic portrait of the self represents *une mise en abîme* of *Histoire de ma vie*’s autobiographical structure, and that the statement “je devenais mosaïque” represents a small fragmented portrait of the author that mirrors the general fragmented *mosaïque* for of *Histoire de ma vie*. Because the method of constructing a mosaic of tiles is similar to that of assembling a patchwork of fabric, I contend that the mosaic of tiles is a *mise en abyme* of Sand’s autobiographical project. Indeed, Sand counts “les petits carrés de lapis et de jaspé” the same way she evaluates each fragments of writing prior to establishing a personal portrait by sorting through, arranging and ultimately assembling the pieces of her life in *Histoire de ma vie*.

⁵⁰ *Descriptions de Saint Marc* is the only other work on mosaic art and was published by Michel Butor in 1962 but does not fall under the category of the novel genre. See Lavagne, 9.

The author formerly limited her auto-portrait to a brief enumeration of fragmented features that stretch across two lines among the five-volume autobiography and matches the description of an official administrative identification document : “yeux noirs, cheveux noirs, front ordinaire, teint pâle, nez bien fait, menton rond, bouche moyenne, taille quatre pied dix pouces” (*Histoire de ma vie*, 504). In contrast, the mosaic perception of herself shows that the squares of “lapis” and “jaspe” are two types of stones that take a symbolic meaning in this *mise en abyme* of Sand’s portrait. First each stone has a distinct contrasting color: lapis is blue and jasper is most commonly a red spotted color. Next, they carry antagonistic values: lapis is symbolic of the spiritual and a catalyst for mystical journey to higher awareness, whereas jasper embodies a connection with nature and the physical world (Simmons, 189;173). Consequently, Sand selects two contrasting types of stones that respectively embody idealism and realism as well as fiction and non-fiction. What I find interesting about the meaning of the stones and their contrasting colors is how lapis and jasper come together in a mosaic to suggest an abstract self-portrait of the author. Moreover, both stones are symbolic of Sand’s family heritage “à cheval sur deux classes” since the lapis stone celebrates royalty (nobility) while jasper represents the earth (proletarian). In this *mise en abyme*, I suggest that Sand gives hope to everyone who wishes to be free to create a literary portrait of their own and an identity that transgresses social norms but that is still connected to the collective.

From the representation of Stenterello on a patchworked pillow top, to writing a historical novel on the art of mosaic, and last but not least, to the author who portrayed herself as *une mosaïque* are all evidence that Sand’s largest and longest autobiographical

work shares many traits with the technique of gathering and assembling the fragments that create a patchwork quilt. The concept of *mosaïque* is a form of *métissage* that interconnects various colored units and which, in Sand's autobiography, self-fashions as a portrait of the woman author artist in a mosaic that moves towards the abstract and the infinite rather than a stable or singular realist picture.

Crafting the crazy quilt and challenging the male model

I previously discussed the general layout of a patchwork quilt and the variety of names assigned depending on style, size and complexity such as Rose of Sharon, Feather Star and Jacob's Ladder to name a few. In my opinion, the structure and form of *Histoire de ma vie* resembles that of the "the crazy quilt"--whose name was inspired by Japanese patchwork art and crazed glass aesthetic— not only because the visual effects mimic mosaic art, but also because the patchwork design is determined as you go with minimum preparation and may be assembled on a series of squares of the same size centered around a large medallion (Gutcheon, 147). While Hiddleton describes the narrative structure of *Histoire de ma vie* as "a pattern of oscillation which disturbs the progressive forward movement as the self cannot be contained within any simple linear movement," I suggest that Sand's autobiographical voice, or "the self" connect two fragments of the text the same way the thread bastes and sews two separate pieces of fabric--or metaphorically two different patches of the textual fabric—and creates an autobiographical pattern as I will discuss below (69). Ledbetter describes the making of a patchwork in four steps: (1) cutting shaped templates; (2) cutting fabric around the template leaving a quarter inch margin (3)

turning the quarter inch margin over the template and basting the fabric and finally (4) sewing individual pieces together (53). Because Sand characterizes the form of her autobiographical discourse as “sans ordre,” I will analyze how the general organization of the epistolary portion (interlining) along with autobiographical disrupts hegemonic discourses so that Sand can establish her authority.

Corambé: the center of fiction “le médaillon”

We have discussed how the patchwork aesthetic not only represents Sand’s needlework artistic skills of weaving different pieces of textiles, as we observed on the pillow top with Stenterello, but the woman-author also applies her needlework technique onto the text of her autobiography. In similar fashion to a “crazy quilt,” which conveys a series of squares assembled and “centered around a large medallion” as Gutcheon puts it, I content that Sand sketched the five volumes of *Histoire de ma vie* in such ways that the central piece of the general autobiographical design emerges in the third volume where Corambé stands at its core. Corambé is a chimeric character who emerges from Sand’s childhood memories and who is only portrayed in *Histoire de ma vie* as « un dieu de mon imagination, un médiateur and un intermédiaire » thanks to whom “les romans composés de millions de romans s’enchaînaient les uns aux autres” (1243). Besides playing a pivotal part in Sand’s life, Corambé also appears precisely at the heart of *Histoire de ma vie* and Sand introduces the chimeric character at equidistance from the first and the last page of the five volume autobiography.

The moment Corambé temporarily intrudes the narration of *Histoire de ma vie* marks a crucial point because Aurore Dupin coalesces with Corambé (the ideal) and

together, I contend, they self-fashion the authorial identity George Sand. This effect creates a center in which Aurore Dupin comes face to face with Corambé before becoming the woman-author, George Sand, in the last two volumes of *Histoire de ma vie*. In the fifth volume, Sand further confirms that “il [Corambé] occupa toujours le centre, et toutes mes fictions qui continueront à se former autour de lui” (1243).⁵¹ As an imaginary character, Corambé not only served as a connection between reality and fiction, but he also played a pivotal role in the author’s fashioning of identity from Aurore Dupin to George Sand. As a personification of the Ideal, Corambé served as a mediator in the self-fashioning of the woman author. Following the publication of her first novel, *Indiana*, in 1832, Sand claims that Corambé vanished “A peine eus-je fini mon livre [Indiana] mon pauvre Corambé s’envola pour toujours [...] il était d’une essence trop subtile pour se plier aux exigences de la forme” (*Histoire de ma vie*, 1242). Corambé is the figure of the Ideal, the symbol of creativity and the essence of imagination. Sand’s chimeric character occupies the space at the core of her autobiography because Corambé is what Kristeva defines as *chora*, and, while it stands at the threshold of language (thetic) as part of the semiotic, Corambé vanishes before it enters the symbolic of language as written words articulated by George Sand on paper and therefore, in similar fashion to the médaillon of the « crazy quilt » it holds and connects the fragments of the text that surrounds it.

I have previously discussed in the first part that crossing various literary genres conveys discordance and disruption in Sand’s work, but the author also seeks to establish

⁵¹ “Je passai trois jours dans un tête à tête assidu avec Corambé.” See *Histoire de ma vie*, 850.

a point of reconciliation, harmony and unity. This “cohérence d’ensemble” brings unity to Sand’s *métissage* of genre, but also to the conception of gender. Having demonstrated that both Jeanne and Corambé play a crucial role in connecting reality and fiction in Sand’s work, I now wish to establish this concept of “in between” within the context of gender. My ultimate purpose in this section is to prove that Sand communicates a new definition of gender by destabilizing the boundaries between male and female to erase the stigma of those binaries, and to ultimately show that a being is mind over body. Among the five volumes, the author never described herself physically at a different period of her life; instead, the author’s physical body type is concealed between the lines of her narration as though her autobiography serves as a second skin which makes fluidity of gender possible. *Jeanne* and *Histoire de ma vie* inspire solidarity in the community, and I also argue that Sand’s metaphysics within the *métissage* of genres communicates a new definition of gender.

Challenging authority in the epistolary structure.

Reusing fabric: gathering and rewriting authentic letters

During the year of 1848, Sand retrieved the letters of her family, which I compare to the quilter’s first step of gathering the right amount of fabric to map out the patchwork (size, colors, and pattern). In the epistolary portion, George Sand goes as far as modifying the authenticity of the letters, to imitating her father’s signature and inventing letters. According to Georges Lubin, who compiled and analyzed the most recent edition of *Correspondances*, “Sand abrège, découpe, greffe l’une sur l’autre, en omets certains

fragment. Elle invente des passages entiers; Il y a plus: trois lettres sont probablement inventées par la romancière” (Bouchener-Franczakowa, 130).⁵² However, Sand only selects and inserts letters from her paternal aristocratic family but omits her mother’s correspondence. In fact, the letters from Sophie-Victoire are absent even though “à cette époque de sa vie” Sand first explains, “elle savait écrire assez pour se faire comprendre” before she reminds the reader of the illiteracy burden for women of the proletarian class: “il fallait les yeux d’un amant pour déchiffrer ce petit grimoire” (*Histoire de ma vie*, 365). The double entendre in “dechiffrer ce petit grimoire” conveys that the semiotic of women’s handwriting fails to penetrate language and integrate symbolic. Sand’s mother becomes the abject in the epistolary section. Discarding her mother’s letters in favor for rewriting the contents of her father and signing them as “Maurice” proves that the author establishes her authority by subverting the legacy and the history of her family. In the epistolary portion of the work –the interlining of the patchwork to continue my metaphor— Sand reinforces the fabric of her story to regain agency over the letter’s content. This process of self-reclamation plays an important role as a means to establish her power over patriarchy and aristocracy.

Cutting fabric: the most creative act

Cutting fabric and cutting text are both an act of self-reclamation that paves the way to autonomy. In general, the decision to “cut” not only serves as an act of self-reliance in

⁵² Bochenek-Franczakowa draws from Georges Lubin’s research. For the letters: the first letter in 1794, see *Histoire de ma vie* 114; letter XI of 1801 see *Histoire de ma vie*, 387-388; and Letter from M. de Beaumont see 406-407.

the creative process, but it is also a subverting act of freedom and emancipation from the dominant, oppressive and inflexible structures that one must abide by (norms, hierarchy, hegemonic language, and institutions). I suggest that Sand was aware of the force that cutting, tearing and ripping entailed in the initial phase of creativity --*invention* as Sand puts it -- including that of needlework as she explains, “Je n’avais jamais cousu de ma vie...Je fus bien étonnée de voir combien cela était facile; mais en même temps je compris que là, comme dans tout, il pouvait y avoir l’invention et la *maestria* du coup de ciseaux.” (1121). Sand’s resolution to fragment by mutilating papers and text in the same manner as mastering scissors to cut a piece of cloth before crafting and patching, are the necessary disruptive steps to create a space for one’s creative act and self-creation. In her articles, Myra Jehlen proposes that in the beginning of the process of constructing her own identity, “all women must destroy in order to create” (593). The autobiographical text and the identity of the author cannot come into existence without tearing and, as Judy Elsley also suggests when it comes to quilting, “this destructive act is paradoxically, also one of the quilter’s most creative acts – an act of courage, necessity and faith” (Elsley, 4) Therefore, Sand’s decision to abridge the family’s letters in her extensive epistolary portion --which, let’s not forget, occupies one fourth of *Histoire de ma vie*’s content-- is a strategical method prior to writing her own story.

The epistolary backbone : asserting patriarchal functions of the family household

While Sand reclaims her authority in the epistolary content, she also keeps a stronghold of the autobiographical structure (form) of these chapters. I claim that the author

establishes a solid foundation to the letters' organization and content as a means to assert her authority over the family household and estate in Nohant, but most importantly, George Sand subverts her role as the objectified woman and woman-author for that of the patriarchal figure. In fact, the voice of the author disrupts the letters in order to comment and to explain their content, topic or historical context, before it vanishes and reappears a few letters later.⁵³ Consequently, Sand creates a pattern that serves as the backbone for the epistolary body of text: a set of letters, Sand's comments, another set of letters, Sand's explanations, letters... etc. The process of cutting, commenting, forging and most importantly rewriting letters altogether mimic a theatrical performance of ventriloquism during which the author finds autonomy and disrupts the entire structure of dominant values, particularly that of social class and authority. In 1848, the woman-author asserts her autonomy and assembles an autobiography, *une histoire de moi* as she puts it, that challenges the male canon.

Challenging phallogocentric discourse: transgressing “sans ordre”

The initial phase of “cutting” not only creates a space for Sand's literary invention but it also challenges texts from the male canon such as Michel de Montaigne's 1595 *Esssais* as well as Rabelais' *Gargantua* which both influenced Sand's knowledge on the

⁵³ For instance, following the first letter she comments “Ici il y a une lacune. Ces premières lettres étaient peut être plus déchirantes...ma grand-mère les aura brûlées” and prior to letter fifteen she notes “La lettre et les fragments suivants ne sont pas dates mais sont tous de pairial” and ultimately reappears after letter forty to indicate. See *Hitoire de ma vie* 114; 126;147.

subjects of philosophy and humanity.⁵⁴ The woman-author uses a respected literary genre of the male canon as a model the same way a quilter chooses a template (*un patron*) for a patchwork. Indeed, Sand echoes her predecessor and she reveals her childhood's readings of Montesquieu, Pascal, Locke as well as Labruyère to list a few, "Le tout" she declares, "sans ordre et sans méthode, comme il me tombèrent sous la main, et avec une facilité d'intuition (*Histoire de ma vie*, 1027).⁵⁵ In turn, Sand imitates Montaigne's well-known details on his library reading routines and writing methods as he claims that "Là je feuillette à cette heure un livre, à cette heure un autre, sans ordre et sans dessein, à pieces décousues ... tantost j'enregistre et dicte, en me promenant, mes songes que voicy" (321).⁵⁶ In this passage, Montaigne explains that his creative work derives from mobility and spontaneity; but most importantly, as I follow the metaphor of text and textiles, he demonstrates that words, thoughts and inspiration take the form of an "unstitched" literary work, which in my opinion transgresses the limitations of a particular genre. I suggest that Montaigne adopted a non-linear style that George Sand explored, developed and modified in *Histoire de ma vie* in which she accepts the model as she declares, "semble assez ferme pour soustenir l'estreinte d'un noeud si pressé et si durable (*Histoire de ma vie*, 1206).

⁵⁴ In her introduction, Béatrice Diaz emphasizes several times on the importance of Montaigne's influence that shaped the woman-author. The introduction reminds that George Sand follows Montaigne's perspectives on morals, fame and private life (33)

⁵⁵ Sand also praise Chateaubriand "... je savoirai donc son livre avec delices [...] et puis je me mis au prises sans facon avec Mably, Locke, Condillac, Montesquieu, Bacon, Bossuet, Aristote, Leibniz, Pascal, Montaigne. [...] Puis les poètes et les moralistes [...] (*Histoire de ma vie*, 1652)

⁵⁶ "Chez moy, je me destourne un peu plus souvent à ma librairie, d'où, tout d'une main, je commande mon message : Je suis sur l'entree ; et vois sous moy, mon jardin, ma basse cour, ma cour, et dans la plus part des membres de ma maison,. See Montaigne, (321)

The process of reproduction was also prevalent in Montaigne's *Essais* since he borrowed more than five hundred quotes, references, and ideas from Plutarch (Billaut, 226). Even though Sand imitates the traditional genre of the authoritative discourse, the woman-author also transgresses it. In similar fashion to a quilter who finds agency with her choice of style, colors, size and meaning for a patchwork genre, Sand assembles a *métissage* of narratives between essay, memoirs, autobiography, non-fiction and fiction. In her theory of *métissage*, Françoise Lionnet argues that women must not only learn to reject traditions before they become the agents of their own discourses, but women must also incorporate "a radical re-reading to the tradition they implicitly aim to transform" (32). Hence, as we have previously discussed, Sand conveys on the one hand a re-reading of the traditions by re-writing the family letters but by transforming them and blurring the lines between epistolary and fiction. On the other hand, the woman author conveys a re-reading of the male canon, in which, I suggest, Sand recasts Montaigne's literary concept of his "pieces décousues" and brings different genres as though she "patching them together" through the process of digressions.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL HYBRIDITY: CONTENT OF THE PATCHWORK QUILT INSCRIBED IN *HISTOIRE DE MA VIE* AS A FORM OF MÉTISSAGE.

Lionnet's approach to the *métissage* of language examines the political questions of race, social class and gender in women's autobiographical fictions, as well as how woman writers' understanding of *métissage* offers the possibility of a collective emancipation (9). Because of her family heritage –thoroughly illustrated in the first and

second part of *Histoire de ma vie*, Sand lives between what Lionnet refers to as “the gaps” that is to say between the archaic and modernity, between aristocracy and proletarian class, between the city of Paris and the countryside of Nohant, and that most importantly, the woman-author understands the concept of *métissage* that interweaves different cultures and traditions. While Lionnet investigates how these voices challenge repressive ideological systems, in analyzing the construction of the patchwork process within text, I am particularly interested in examining the functions of regional dialect and oral traditions in Le Berry, and how the narrative “I” plays the role of the needlework basting process to sew two arguments and themes together as a means to illustrate Sand’s strategic braiding of various linguistic-cultural threads.

My goal is not to redefine the specific characteristics of auto-fiction and autobiography, nor to explain how one category differs from the other; instead, I wish to understand the way in which the publication of *Jeanne* influenced *Histoire de ma vie* and helped Sand establish herself in the 1840s, prior to writing her most renowned rustic novels *La petite Fadette* and *Francois le Champi*. Raphael Baroni’s article “Authentifier la fiction ou généraliser l’autobiographie?” focuses on the author’s intentions in auto-fiction and autobiography. According to Baroni’s theory, “l’autofiction ne met en scene l’expérience authentique vécue de l’auteur que dans l’espoir de valider sa représentation,” whereas “l’autobiographie offre la possibilité de se porter au-delà de l’histoire individuelle, et de lire la vie de l’auteur comme une vie exemplaire” (98). I agree with Baroni’s approach, particularly because I believe that Sand conceives *Jeanne* and *Histoire de ma vie* in order to transgress and disrupt the literary patterns set by the phallocentric discourse. More

specifically, Sand blurs the lines between categories by generating, on the one hand, a rustic novel with fragmented pieces of autobiography (*Jeanne*) and on the other hand, an autobiography with fragmented parts of the rustic novel (*Histoire de ma vie*). The disturbance of the genres creates a technique that juxtaposes, intermingles and ultimately self-fashions a hybrid narrative that conveys a *métissage* of writing styles.

The author restores a sense of harmony among different social classes. Sand's *métissage* gives voice to the repressed traditions and initiates a genuine dialogue with the dominant discourse the woman-writer hopes to transform. In a similar fashion, Sand identifies herself in *Histoire de ma vie* as "une paysanne du Berry" and recounts numerous anecdotes about Le Berry, including local traditions such as "faire de la feuille," which she defines in a footnote as « une expression berrichonne signifiant rentrer du fourrage pour les moutons en prévision de l'hiver » (818). I therefore set forth that Sand intends to educate her audience by taking the bourgeois reader onto uncovered linguistic paths as *Histoire de ma vie* unveils multiple linguistic facets that stretch beyond the formal boundaries of conventional literary texts as she confronts the hegemonic language.

I claim that *Jeanne* serves as a prototype for Sand to explore the limits of the rustic novel. The author seeks to create an innovative style with the purpose of creating her own discourse within the rustic genre, which she later replicates in 1848 for her autobiography *Histoire de ma vie*. In her correspondence, Sand confirms her love for *le langage des paysans*, and considers it *plus correcte* than standard French (*Correspondence*, VIII 58). In *Jeanne*'s preface, the author criticizes her own writing style, stating that "mon propre style me gênait" (31). This discomfort not only conveys a sense of void and incompleteness in

her writing style, but it also demonstrates the author's relentless effort to unite French citizens, both modern and archaic, considering that the population was still culturally, socially and linguistically divided because of wars and political tensions during the 1840's. In her article, « *Préhistoire Et Filiation: George Sand et Le Mythe Des Origines Dans Jeanne*, » Isabelle Naginski emphasizes Sand's concerns about a clear division among the French population: on the one hand, the politically dominant, wealthy, urban and modern citizens; and on the other hand, the citizens deprived of political and economic power, forgotten in the French countryside (66.)

Subsequently, in 1844, Sand already defended *le berrichon* in an open letter to the editor of a local newspaper called *L'Eclaireur*, in which she pointed out the imaginary geographical frontier, "une ligne de demarcation," as she called it, between north and south of France that separated both old French languages, *la langue d'oc* and *la langue d'oïl* (*Correspondence VI*, 677-78). In the newspaper, Sand explains that "une ligne de demarcation" used to stretch across the land of La Marche, most precisely where the story of *Jeanne* takes place. Sand further clarifies that neighboring population of La Marche used to be fortunate to speak both languages (oil and oc) because, "C'était là, au confluent de la Creuse et de la Sedelle que passait la ligne séparatrice des deux dialectes" (678). Like the place of confluence that merges La Creuse and La Sedelle (two rivers near La Marche), to reuse Sand's metaphor, the novel *Jeanne* merges various discordant languages. The author's perception on languages shows a diversity that goes beyond the idea of *une ligne de demarcation* that separates peasants, the physical boundaries constructed by hegemonic

discourses. This *métissage* creates new stories that convey a site of learning, particularly how to live in connection to one another.

NEEDLEWORK AS A RHETORICAL TOOL FOR A SUBVERSIVE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL DISCOURSE

The back of the patchwork, before being quilted, appears as an incomprehensible design mix of webs. This *métissage* of multicolored threads woven together in different directions forms a matrix that represents the pre-symbolic (the semiotic) that is to say the state of language prior to the self-fashioning of the author: from Aurore Dupin, to Corambé and ultimately to George Sand. As noted above, the author's childhood chimeric character, Corambé, represents what Julia Kristeva defines as the *chora*, an energy as well as a psychological manifestation that triggers the eruption of the semiotic within the symbolic and simultaneously provides the creative and innovative impulse of modern poetic language (Sullivan, *Weaving the Word*, 44). The author must transgress the *thetic* boundary between the semiotic and the symbolic in order to reach the state of autonomous self as George Sand. Because the *thetic* serves as a filter that sustains the symbolic against the semiotic drives that would destroy it, Aurore Dupin's identity must fade in order to embody the self-fashioned George Sand. Similarly, the process of selection, cutting, rearranging, and modifying the epistolary content was a crucial step in the self-fashioning of the author autobiographical identity.

According to Kristeva, literary work and all forms of artistic endeavor fundamentally interpenetrate; similarly, the connection between artistic production and the psyche give ways to subjectivity (Sullivan, *Weaving the Word* 35). In *Histoire de ma vie*

(and *Jeanne*), Sand's artistic practice of patchwork and *métissage* of genres create a personal autobiographical space to establish her autobiographical form and voice. This space on paper as much as the space on fabric serve as "a site of indeterminacy" (to use Lionnet's description) where solidarity becomes the fundamental principle of political action against hegemonic languages. In similar fashion to *Jeanne*, a text Sand revisits before writing a preface, Sand creates a new "type" of autobiographical authority by self-fashioning a new autobiographical vision through its form, function and content.

I connect *métissage* to my definition of *tissage*, weaving the word in ways that design a customized autobiographical fabric for this author. Indeed, *Histoire de ma vie* conveys a hybrid construction of the autobiographical genre that Sand also employs in what I define as a patchwork of genres, which includes contemplations, epistolary, historical and realist narratives. Garber defines the "Third" as a mode of articulation that describes a space of possibility, that is a say a space of creativity and innovation, Lionnet's "site of indeterminacy." Since Sand's *tissage* of the autobiographical fabric juxtaposes various pieces of narratives to create a whole, I suggest that Garber's concept of the "Third" translates into the space of creativity for Sand to self-fashion her autobiographical portrait, which conveys, in my opinion, the artistic creation of a patchwork as I demonstrated. In a similar fashion to a seamstress' needle, whose yarn assembles and stitches pieces of cloth, the ink of Sand's pen fastens various events of her life to manufacture the autobiographical fabric, which, ultimately results in an artistic patchwork patterns akin to the art of a mosaic

master.⁵⁷ Sand's "assemblage" and "tissage" of *Histoire de ma vie*, like that of a *mosaïste*, must be interpreted from a distance to understand the unity of the self-fashioned portrait, and exposes the idea of idealism. Instead of engaging in egotistic autobiographical narrative that favors and enhances personal achievements like the male autobiographical model, Sand stitches the moral fiber of the French nation in the aftermath of the Revolution of 1848 and *Histoire de ma vie* sets forth a message of solidarity among the people and shapes a new vision of unity.

George Sand's *Histoire de ma vie* was reminiscent of a patchwork quilt chronicling the concept of unity and solidarity forged in French society since the nation was left divided after the revolution of 1848 and progressively reconstructed an identity. During this period of autobiographical writing from 1848 to 1854, Le Théâtre de Nohant prospered as a small and popular enterprise away from glamorous Parisian theaters. George Sand's son Maurice primarily directed and managed Le Théâtre des Marionnettes (the puppet theater). While the Sand family hosted friends and intellectuals at their countryside estate, the Nohant theater staged improvised plays and served to experiment with new theatrical genres and to rehearse plays that would later be presented in Paris.

George Sand directed three theatrical productions, *Francois le Champi* (1865), *Le Marquis de Villemer* (1867), and *L'Autre* (1870), in which Sarah Bernhardt played the lead role at Le Théâtre de l'Odéon following her resignation from Le Théâtre-Français in 1863. These three collaborations paved the way for a close friendship and mutual respect between

⁵⁷ George Sand wrote *Les Maitres mosaïstes* (1836) a historical and moral novel on mosaic art – the only one in French literature to this day-- that falls out of any literary category as a genre (Lavagne 6)

both women-artists beginning in 1865. In fact, Sand served as both a mother figure as well as a mentor to the rising star, Bernhardt, who soon became known as “à la voix d’or” and “La Divine Sarah” for the rest of her career. In her article, “George Sand and Sarah Bernhardt,” Bernadette Chevelon demonstrates that Sand indirectly initiated young Bernhardt’s success on stage. At the beginning of her career, Bernhardt was highly protected⁵⁸ and controlled by the male authorities of theatrical industry. But as a budding complicity developed between two generations of women artists from 1865 to 1870, Sand mentored and taught the young actress to navigate among and be integrated into the Parisian elites, both artistic and intellectual. In her memoir, *Ma double vie*, Bernhardt depicted her first encounter with Prince Napoleon, which came about thanks to George Sand during the rehearsals of *Francois le Champi* and *Le Marquis de Villemer* in 1867. As the daughter of a courtesan and an unknown father, Bernhardt belonged to the *demi-monde* and had to cross various social, hierarchical and gender boundaries to succeed.

Despite the forty-year gap that separated the two women, Sand and Bernhardt had much in common. ⁵⁹ In fact, both grew up fatherless and were raised by a mother from the proletarian class whose absence, I suggest, created a void that was filled by a desire for art and creativity. This commonality produced a strong mutual respect and a magnetic attraction that Bernhardt articulated in an affectionate portrait in *Ma double vie*:

⁵⁸ It is on February 25, 1865 that George Sand first encountered Sarah Bernhardt at the train station. Sand appeared to be mesmerized by Sarah’s personality: “En allant au chemin de fer de chez nous, nous rencontrons deux femmes dont une se dit protégée de Girardin: quelle protégée!” The editor, Anne Cheveneau emphasized in a note that the “protégée” is in fact Sarah Bernhardt. See Sand *Agendas*, tome 3, 256.

⁵⁹ In 1867, Sand was sixty-three years old whereas Bernhardt was twenty-three

Mes répétitions du *Marquis de Villemer* et de *François le Champi* sont restées dans mon souvenir comme autant d'heures exquises. Mme George Sand, douce et charmante créature, était d'une timidité extrême.... Je regardais cette femme avec une tendresse Romanesque. N'avait-elle pas été l'héroïne d'un beau roman d'amour? Je m'asseyais près d'elle. Je lui prenais la main et la tenais le plus longtemps possible dans la mienne. Sa voix était douce et charmeuse (*Ma double vie*, 170).

In their 1867 collaboration, Bernhardt was twenty-one years old and George Sand, whom Bernhardt idolized, appeared to have played a pivotal role in the early stage of the actress's artistic career. Given the timing of their encounters, it seems likely that Sand's artistic success inspired the young actress to self-fashion her own identity in tribute to or dialogue with her mentor's. While Sand's *redingote-guêrite* subverted and challenged gender norms in the 1830s streets of Paris, Bernhardt's choice of clothing similarly conveyed a transgressive meaning on the page, on the stage, and in the visual arts during La Belle Époque. Dresses, costumes, suits and accessories brought mobility to Bernhardt's polyvalent identity as an actress, a singer, a sculptor, and a writer who received the title of "Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur des Arts et des Lettres" on January 14, 1914.

Chapter 2: Drapery and Duplicity in Sarah Bernhardt's *Ma Double Vie*: Performing a Fiction of Reality

“... pour quelques heures, on dépouille
sa propre personnalité pour en endosser une autre;
et l'on marche dans le rêve d'une autre vie, oubliant tout”

Sarah Bernhardt, *Ma double vie*, 324

INTRODUCTION

Sarah Bernhardt, born Henriette-Rosine Bernard (1844-1923), was the daughter of courtesan Judith Van Hard and Edmond Bernard, a law school student who was entirely absent from Bernhardt's life.⁶⁰ Biographers, scholars and contemporaries have struggled to elucidate the truth behind her mythic origins, such as a veritable birth place and birth date as well as the identity of her father.⁶¹ Bernhardt's confidante, Madame Berton, wrote a posthumous biography, *The Real Sarah Bernhardt: whom her audience never knew* (1924), in which she explained that “The ‘Divine’ Sarah was divine only in her inspiration; the ‘immortal’ Sarah was immortal solely in her ‘art’” (24). The actress resented Rosine as her given name early on, so she fabricated a new identity by choosing Sarah as her first name. Pierre Spivakoff, a set designer and actor, calls Bernhardt “un être mi-rêve, mi-réalité” who is “l'essence même du génie” and I maintain that one must analyze Bernhardt's personae as an artist who self-fashioned her own genius, rose to fame and

⁶⁰ Sarah Bernhardt called her mother Youle in *Ma double vie*.

⁶¹ Some registers set Bernhardt's birthplace as rue du Faubourg St Honore while others archives like that of Le Conservatoire, recorded rue de l'Ecole de Medecine. See Spivakoff 2.

defied the odds of being a woman with multiple artistic talents (2). In fact, Sarah Bernhardt not only established a career as a world-famous actress, but she was also a painter, a sculptor and a writer in a society that did not give women the freedom for artistic or financial independence. “La Divine” Sarah, who played more than two-hundred roles during her career, ensured that she would still be performing from the afterlife by leaving a panoply of artistic works which includes dozens of voice recordings, seven films, essays on acting, novels, plays, a memoir, posters, sculptures, paintings, jewels, and drawings (Emboden, 12). Most importantly, the actress, whose elongated body wrapped in spiraling drapery was often compared to that of a snake, sloughed off her second skin and left behind a collection of clothes and costumes that now belong to museums around the world.

In this chapter, I examine the representation of drapery in Bernhardt’s autobiography, her performances and the visual arts that circulated during La Belle Époque, in order to prove that the actress’ deployment of sartorial elements in her art kept a delicate balance between her personal and social image on the stage as well as off the stage. Critics, caricaturists, painters, and friends immortalized the actress in newspapers, biographies, paintings, sculptures and lithographs in which the elegance and the extravagance of her outfits were the focus of the public’s attention. I argue that textiles played a crucial role in propelling Bernhardt to stardom and established her identity as much as her legacy. I also claim that drapery, like a shield, is a form of clothing that facilitated the actress’ self-preservation in the public eye and I analyze Bernhardt’s representation of drapery in her autobiography, her performances and Alphonse Mucha’s lithographs in which doubling and framing prevail as a form of self-management and

control to blur the liminal boundaries between reality and fiction, life and death, youth and maturity, as well as the private and the public.

Ma double vie was published in 1907 both in French and in English, although there exists a significant gap between the time fifty-four-year old Sarah Bernhardt began to pen her memoirs in 1898 and the time period covered by the work which covers her childhood and life up to 1881.⁶² This seventeen-year gap is intriguing because the author decided to frame her life story from her first memories to her return from the yearlong tour in the United States as an independent artist leading her own company. In fact, Bernhardt became one of the first French woman actresses to travel across the Atlantic to perform instead of depending on famous French theater companies such as La Comédie Française to receive an income. Her 1880 American tour was a success and counted one hundred fifty-seven representations since it raised an average of 17,000 Francs per representation. During this time, Bernhardt visited fifty American cities (*Ma double vie*, 578). Unlike the American press who marketed and documented Bernhardt's journey in newspapers, the tour was barely advertised by French press.

In the pages to follow, I examine Bernhardt's depiction of clothing and the concept of drapery as dress. First, I claim that Bernhardt created a fiction of reality in *Ma double vie* and that on the one hand, the autobiographical narrative "I" stayed rooted and immobile like the true identity of the actor on stage; on the other hand, the clothes that Bernhardt selected in her descriptions changed this identity to create mobility. Sarah Bernhardt knew

⁶² In 1880, Bernhardt left La Comédie Française prior to her tour in the United States.

her powers and her influences, but most importantly, Bernhardt knew herself. In other words, my analysis will demonstrate that Bernhardt's narrative "I" never ceased to be the core and the foundation of her persona, while the woman's garments served as a changing factor for this identity.

In *Ma double vie* and in Bernhardt's visual art representations, I interpret the narrative "I" or subject as two-fold: on the one hand, the first person narrator refers to the biological body (reality) and on the other hand, the social body (fiction) symbolizes Bernhardt's projection of how she wants to be seen (fiction). In *Le pacte autobiographique*, Philippe Lejeune describes the differences within the autobiographical genre and explains that the first-person narrator can play a role within the autobiographical discourse (20). In that case, the narrative "I" establishes a discourse inside a discourse (20). For instance, Lejeune further declares, "la ré-citation" of a play on stage conveys on the one hand, the fictional character "I" who recites and on the other hand, the identity of the actor as the first-person narrator on stage (20). As the critic concludes, "le caractère fictif de la personne qui dit 'je' ce n'est pas la personne qui définit le 'je' mais peut-être le 'je', la personne" (20). What Lejeune illustrates here is the duplicity of voices in the autobiographical discourse and a first-person narrator whose identity fluctuates between facts and fiction.

Despite Bernhardt's dysfunctional family and unconventional upbringing, the theatrical setting established a major structure to the actress's life. I suggest that the performance on stage (fiction) and in life (reality) applies to the doubling of identity in Bernhardt's *Ma double vie*, and that clothing such as drapery wrapped around the body served as much of a structure as the theatrical setting, a space that the actress cherished and

within which she self-fashioned her success. Philippe Lejeune not only compares the theatrical setting as the fictional environment within which the first-person narrator tells a story, “un discours à l’intérieur d’un discours,” but the critic also questions, “Quand la Berma joue *Phèdre*, qui dit ‘je’? La situation théâtrale peut certes remplir la fonction de guillemets, signalant le caractère fictif et la personne qui dit ‘je’” (20). Quotation marks, according to Lejeune, indicate a fictional self within the theatrical structure. I use Lejeune’s reference to the quotation marks which, figuratively, wrap around the narrative “I,” and I compare them to a layer of drapery wrapped around the identity of the actress on stage, in the public eye, in the autobiographical text and in visual arts.

In numerous photographs, no more than a fourth of Bernhardt’s body is visible: her face is uncovered, which confirms Bernhardt’s bodily identity, and her clothing narrates the stories of her myriad social identities. Indeed, the surface of the clothing’s fabric is the space through which the actress expresses herself and inscribes her fantasies. Bernhardt’s position in the public eye was ever changing and ranges from object of desire to subject of her own story. What plays a key role in this exchange is the layers of textiles that Bernhardt wore in order to control the seen and the unseen, that is the say, that blurs the line between the autobiographical narrative “I”—the “je soussigné,” as Lejeune puts it—from the fictional “I.” I will show that the cascading fabrics served to fashion Bernhardt’s identity and construct her life as a fiction of her personal reality--what Spivakoff referred to as “un être mi-rêve, mi-réalité” (2).

The actress had many reasons to write her autobiography and to establish her authority in literature as she did in the artistic discipline of sculpting. *Ma double vie* was a

response to her critics, which included numerous caricatures of her person published at the time of her rise to stardom. Even though *Ma double vie* set a tone of indifference towards critics, in which she declared “J’avais une telle habitude des turpitudes écrite sur mon compte, que je m’en inquiétais guère,” (339). I claim that Bernhardt wielded a genius of sorts as she managed to control her personal image and crafted the one she wanted the audience to see. However, I believe that the woman-author/artist/actress constructed, readjusted, and molded her public image both to fight the negative critics and create her own truth. I submit that Bernhardt’s strategy was to connect both visual arts and text as mediums of communication and that, in many ways, *Ma double vie* served as a descriptive commentary to the photographs she personally marketed.

Additionally, *Ma double vie* was an attempt to undo the scandal that erupted in 1883 following the publication of *Les mémoires de Sarah Barnum* written by her rival Marie Colombier upon their return from the United States tour. According to biographer Claudette Joannis, Sarah Bernhardt sought revenge for Colombier’s damning book by vandalizing Colombier’s apartment and co-writing a revenge novel entitled *La vie de Marie Pigeonnier* (1884).⁶³ Joannis claims that Bernhardt’s revenge book was not only as defaming as her rival’s, but also hurt Bernhardt’s public image: “Pour les journalistes comme pour le public, Sarah sera dorénavant, et pour longtemps, Sarah Barnum” (145). Hence, I explore how Bernhardt regained control over her public image with a period of renaissance in the 1890s and the ways in which the Art Nouveau style of La Belle Epoque,

⁶³ This pillage led to a duel between Paul Bonnetain who protected Colombier and Jean Richepin with whom Sarah co-wrote *La vie de Marie Pigeonnier*. See Joannis 145.

alongside Bernhardt's experiences on stage, influenced the actress's self-fashioning in *Ma double vie*. As I will demonstrate, Bernhardt's autobiographical writing mimicked l'Art Nouveau and followed the aesthetic of the artistic movement. Thanks to Bernhardt's roles in Victorien Sardou's plays such as *Gismonda* (1894), *Fédora* (1882), *Théodora* (1884) and *La Tosca* (1887) as well as her collaboration with Alphonse Mucha who drew the first sketch of the actress in 1890, I will show how Bernhardt exploited the power of visual arts through lithograph and drapery to prosper on the stage as a fifty-year old actress.

DRAPERY IN BERNHARDT'S MA DOUBLE VIE: INNER SKIN AND OUTER SKIN

Drapery

In real life and in visual arts, drapery is a form of clothing that introduces vitality, fluidity, and mysterious beauty. Draping was the main clothing style during antiquity. Paintings, ceramics and sculptures testify that drapery survived across the centuries. Because these visual representations draped the body of mythological deities, figures of authorities, heroes and philosophers, drapery still suggests power and divine nature (Hollander, 11). As a performer in classical dramas as popular as *Phèdre*, *Gismonda* (1894) and *Théodora* (1884) drapery was, according to Reynaldo Hahn, the style of dress that fitted Sarah's personae and character with "...complicated folds of drapery, but the line very pure--one of those dresses that only Sarah, draped and pinned on to her..." (6). Clothes, folds, fabric accessories, jewels and ornaments suggested fashion, social status, divinity and power. As Anne Hollander explains, in ancient Greece for instance, most civil garments were hung and wrapped or tied and pinned around the body. Unlike other

garments, drapery conveys malleability, creativity and interchangeability; visually, drapery has had a great deal of power over the perception of dress in life, and therefore, I suggest there are some similarities between the ways Bernhardt channeled this type of textile as garment, her personae and the identity she portrayed (12). In *Draping Period Costumes: Classical Greek to Victorian*, Sharon Sobel claims that drapery falls freely, it is hard to tame, therefore it is important for the person or the tailor to “listen to what the fabric is telling you” and, as it is often depicted by critics and Reynaldo Hahn, Sarah’s body was in harmony with the fabric on stage and in life (8). Because the Latin adjective for “textiles” is *textura*, which is defined as texture and structure, I will show that Bernhardt weaved, a structure around the body to create a fiction of her reality.⁶⁴ Her choice of textiles, fabrics and clothes, just like the choice of grammar and words, contributed to a presentation of the self that was fictional. As a result, I will study the connection between textiles and text that shape the structure of *Ma double vie*.

⁶⁴ See Thompson, Hazel and Day Ola., 158.

Internalizing Body Distortion: Sketching the Self



Illustration 6: Sarah Bernhardt's auto-portrait autographed. 1875. Pencil drawing.
(Collection Henri Breuil Manuscripts. Bibliothèque municipale de Dijon)

I assert that in the 1870s, the actress had already internalized the subjective experience of body image distortion and how this body image was affected by others in a social environment, that is to say, how her feminine silhouette was translated into mass

media. In 1875, Bernhardt was a rising star when she sketched her self-portrait for Louis Morel-Retz Stop's *Le Livre d'Or* (Illustration 6) (53-54).⁶⁵ The actress autographed and annotated the drawing on which she declared: "J'ai voulu, j'ai pu. C'est la chose qui me semble la plus difficile sur ce monde." Despite the challenges that she faced throughout her career and life, Bernhardt's message next to the drawing conveyed a sense of pride and satisfaction toward her personal achievements. However, the actress's resilience, grandiosity and her heroism suggested in these words contrasts with the physical thinness of her silhouette. Indeed, the fabric that stretched from the top to the bottom of the page annihilates the actress's body. This angle not only accentuates Bernhardt's extremely slender figure, but it also demonstrates that the actress perceives the actual body itself, "the inner skin," as less important than the "outer skin."⁶⁶

The morphology of the body is a caricature. Indeed, Bernhardt's elongated limbs and fingers point at a silhouette of herself who is twenty years older and with voluptuous curves next to which she indicated "vingt ans après" (twenty years later). The older silhouette walks toward the top of the hill wearing a body-hugging dress and holding a scepter which gives her a position of sovereign power. Bernhardt points at a parody of her infamously thin figure which, as I will further demonstrate, was widely advertised and caricatured by the press' critics (Illustrations 7 and 8). I assert that this autographed pencil

⁶⁵ Sarah Bernhardt's autographed portrait 1875 belongs to the Collection de Manuscrits de Henri Breuil. See Morel-Retz Stop.

⁶⁶ I juxtapose this auto-caricature to the photograph captured by Mélandri (1880) for Bernhardt's role in *Frou-Frou* (Illustration 6). Bernhardt's autographed drawing also suggests a sketch of the template projected for the design of this dress in *Frou-Frou* in particular.

drawing (Illustration 6) is a caricature as well, because by 1875, Sarah had already attended drawing and sculpting courses. Additionally, she drew a sketch of her first sculpture *Après la tempête* (1876). The sculpture was sold for 10,000 Francs in 1878 (*Ma double vie*, 381).⁶⁷ Therefore, Sarah Bernhardt did not lack of drawing skills and I claim that this autographed sketch demonstrates the actress's distorted perception of her own body which she wrapped in the fabric of draperies.

Body distortion is a psychological state that Bernhardt learned to manage from inside and outside throughout her career. In her research "Body Image Distortion Following Rejection or Acceptance Cue," Wentin Mu claims that body image distortion is multi-faceted, having both perceptual and attitudinal components. Mu further explains that distortion represents the perceptual constituent about how one perceives the self, while dissatisfaction defines how one reacts to this perception (396). The pain Bernhardt endured from the absence of her mother, Youle, during her childhood did more than simply lead the actress to seek her independence. In fact, Bernhardt was raised by a wet nurse and later educated at the Saint Augustin convent before entering Le Conservatoire de Paris, the prestigious music and dance school (*Ma double Vie*, 1-7). Bernhardt expressed this repeated abandonment and her disappointment each time Youle left and explained that "Ma mère heureuse et confidante, repartit pour ses voyages, me laissant de nouveau à la garde de mes tantes"; sometimes, the nanny lost complete contact with Youle (4). Despite this absence, Youle contributed to her daughter's entry in Le Conservatoire thanks to her

⁶⁷ Sarah Bernhardt's sculpture *Après la tempête* was sold to Henry Gambard in 1878. Today, the sculpture is in Washington D.C. at the National Museum of Women in Arts.

connection to Le Duc de Morny. In addition, Youle invested the dowry that Sarah's father left for his daughter's marriage because she refused to grant her daughter's wish to become a nun after Sarah refused to marry.

Sarah's desire to receive Youle's love and compassion was illustrated in the first two chapters of *Ma double vie*. In fact, the autobiography begins with "Ma mère adorait voyager.... Elle envoyait à ma nourrice: des vêtements pour elle, et des gâteaux pour moi" and later, Youle reappears occasionally in the narration of Sarah's childhood memories, sometimes simply sending money and candy to her daughter. As a young child, Bernhardt yearned to establish a relationship with Youle and she longed for her mother's care and attention. When her mother left, Sarah stopped eating, threw fits and became reckless, "un véritable coup de théâtre" she claims, so that she could bring her mother back to Paris: "Mes cris avait attiré du monde" and "On m'a conté de que rien n'était plus douloureux et charmant que le desespoir de ma mère" (3; 5). Yet the mother-daughter tensions lasted throughout Bernhardt's career and Bernhardt confided, "J'adorais ma mère mais nos idées étaient si peu les mêmes" (154). Youle's rejection and criticisms compelled the young woman to internalize her fear, urged her to find her independence and quickly taught her to seek that love from the public. The first pages of *Ma double vie* teach the reader that dramatic performances were already on Sarah's agenda like a second nature.

The environment in which the performer evolved infused her with an internal fear regarding body perception. Negative body and appearance feedback from family and peers is associated with the development of body image distortion (Mu, 396). First, Bernhardt suffered at a young age from her relatives' opinions, particularly her uncles who judged

her “maigre à faire pleurer les oies” (*Ma double vie*, 65). Next, she explained that she retained vivid memories of the director setting the norms on body appearance. During her first audition, Auger told her: “Et surtout ... ne vous laisser pas engraisser comme cette grande chanteuse. La graisse est l’ennemi de la femme et de l’artiste” (78). The threats evolved into direct criticisms of Bernhardt’s thinness. Indeed, Sarah explained that her directors’ comments varied from “on n’a jamais vu une bergère si maigre” in *On ne badine pas avec l’amour*, to “Mais pourquoi t’obsitiner à faire du théâtre? ... tu es maigre, petite et ta figure est gentille de près et laide de loin” (116-117). These examples are numerous in *Ma double vie* and prevail as a pattern in the autobiography. As a consequence, it illustrates the narrator’s constant exposure to a distorted body standard. Negative words originate from Bernhardt’s inner circle or relatives, but extend to the external workplace as well as the media. Therefore, Sarah inevitably internalized this distorted self-image.

The autographed pencil drawing proves that by 1875, Sarah had not only internalized what the critics said about body type, but she also turned this negatively distorted physical trait into a self-promoting marketing powerhouse. First, the author-narrator criticizes her body repeatedly as “mince” and not “maigre,” that is to say, the actress perceives herself as thin and fit instead of sickly thin. Although her weak body caused various health complications, she learned to make fun of her appearance, rather than be self-conscious. For instance at a social event during the 1878 Exposition Universelle, the owner of the house offered an umbrella because of torrential rain and Bernhardt responded “Oh Monsieur! je suis si mince que je ne peux me mouiller, je passe entre les gouttes” and added that “le mot fut répété et fit fortune” (377). Bernhardt further explained

that while her popularity had increased dramatically and brought more attention than she needed, she was also much more confident and that “Mes goûts un peu fantastiques, ma maigreur, ma pâleur, ma façon toute personnelle de m’habiller, mon mépris de la Mode, mon j’m’enfichisme de toutes choses, faisaient de moi un être à part” (379).

Therefore, *Ma double vie* was an autobiography in which the author revealed her personal growth from inside out. The actress learned to internalize the criticisms and, as I will show in the third part, to project a fantasy on the outside thanks to fabric. This projection of a fictional self not only fueled the critics, but also established an image, a type like Colette’s Claudine, that served as self-generating power in the society. The 1875 drawing shows the thin silhouette of an actress who was now in control of her own destiny. That tall skinny Bernhardt pointing at a more corpulent figure seems imperious and shows a displacement of power that resides outside of the physical body.

From Inside Out

Resilience: from “malgré-moi” to “quand même”

Clothing gave the actress confidence throughout the years, and *Ma double vie* illustrates this self-assertion. Bernhardt recounts the moment she first encountered the Prince Napoleon and explains: “je devins pâle et sentis mon cœur s’arrêter...Mme Sand me présenta à lui malgré moi.... Je répondis à peine aux compliments qu’il me fit et me glissais tout contre George Sand” (*Ma double vie*, 170-171). In this passage, the expression “malgré moi” leads the reader to two interpretations. On the one hand, the author implies her reluctance to interact with royalty: “Malgré moi” means despite myself, that is to say that

the actress engaged to act against her will. On the other hand, Bernhardt's reaction shows vulnerability and timidity (170). Indeed, Sarah finds refuge "je...me glissais contre George Sand," as though Sand's body served as a protective shield, a second skin and a buffer against the Prince (171).⁶⁸ In *Ma double vie*, there exists a constant duplicity between the way Sarah feels inside and how she reacts outside.

What Bernhardt teaches us in *Ma double vie* is her tenacity. Despite her weak body, her self-assertion defied the odds. She created the motto "Quand même," which she declares "était un vouloir réfléchi" when "je me résolu d'être quelqu'un" and the idiom also convey duplicity (130, 122). Ockman translates "Quand même" as "through it all" and "no matter what" but I suggest that it also connote "finally" and "after all." The saying insists on opposition and Bernhardt's awareness of the past and her willingness to accept the circumstances and the outcome. Moreover, "Quand même" served as an emblematic signature stamp since it is found engraved on many objects owned by Bernhardt (Ockman, 9). The motto is a sign of resilience that not only became the symbol of Bernhardt's theatrical empire but also one of the first international marketable businesses self-fashioned by a woman from the proletariat.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Bernhardt praises Sand as a mother figure who instinctively defended the young actress "caressa doucement la joue" before telling Prince Napoleon, "C'est ma petite Madone [...] ne la tourmentez pas." See *Ma double vie* 171.

⁶⁹ Bernhardt auctioned her jewelry, costumes and art. See Ockman 10.

Duality of the Villain-Hero: A Critical Eye on Feminine Body and Fashion

Similar to a theatrical play, Bernhardt's doubleness, or divided personae, are constantly in tension, vacillating between a hero and a villain in *Ma double vie*. The narrator often shared her critical opinion on beauty, aesthetic and fashion towards other women for higher ranks. In her posthumous biography (written upon Bernhardt's request) *The Real Sarah Bernhardt Whom Her Audiences Never Knew* (1924), Madame Berton emphasized the duplicity of the actress' persona and explains "she was loved, not because she was saint but because she was not a saint" (Berton, 24).⁷⁰ *Ma double vie* also unveils this double opinion. For instance, Bernhardt's moral portrait of George Sand in 1865 accentuated the generosity and grandiosity of the woman-author; however, Bernhardt's physical portrait uses crude and debasing adjectives. For instance, the narrator's portraits claimed that Sand "...parlait peu et fumait tout le temps. Ses grands yeux étaient toujours rêveurs. Sa bouche, un peu lourde et vulgaire, avait une grande bonté. Elle avait peut être été d'une taille moyenne mais elle semblait tassée" (170). The contrast between a flattering and demeaning observations towards public figures is a pattern in the autobiography. For instance, she describes the Empress as "plus jolie que sur ses portraits" in her dress that "emprisonnait son corps qui semblait être moulé dans l'étoffe" and yet, whose charm disappeared when she spoke: "Cette voix rauque et dure, sortant de cette blondeur, me fit l'effet d'un choc" (180). Hence, *Ma double vie* articulates this duplicity of observations as

⁷⁰ Madame Berton, who was Bernhardt's confident, was the widow of Pierre Berton. Before the Berton couple married, Sarah had an intimate relationship for two years with Pierre Berton. According to Madame Berton, her husband stood by the actress's side during scandals and convinced to support. See Berton 19.

the narrator reports both flattering and demeaning physical traits. The author-narrator turns *Ma double vie* into her own critic of society.

Externalizing

Clothing Takes a Role in the Plot: Le Paletot that saved l'Odéon

Clothing in Sarah's memoirs play a distinctive key role in the unfolding and unraveling of the plot. I focus on two major clothing items, the military prefect's "Paletot" (a military jacket) and then Sarah's belt, to demonstrate Bernhardt's ability to recreate a performance in writing. In "Sarah Bernhardt's Exteriority Effect" Sharon Marcus analyzes how Sarah's performing techniques such as mobility, framing, tempo control, and hyperextension affect the audience (296-297).⁷¹ In contrast, I group them under the rubric of "exteriority effects."

During the Commune, Bernhardt explains that she transformed l'Odéon theater into an infirmary and served as a first responder. She used her connections from Emile de Girardin to organize a meeting with military chief to receive medical supplies, and to negotiate the removal of the gun powder stock in the Odéon basement. Bernhardt tried to present her most seductive side; she asked her maid "Tu me trouverais jolie, dis, si tu me voyais pour la première fois? ...il faut que ce vieux préfet me trouve jolie, j'ai tant de chose à lui demander" (213). In contrast, because of the impending invasion of the German

⁷¹ Bernhardt included a photograph of herself with the belt entitled "Sarah Bernhardt en costume de voyage" (1880). See *Ma double vie*, 456-457.

troops, Bernhardt explains, the Tuileries Palace was occupied by soldiers with dirty hair, and filthy clothes (212).

Bernhardt staged a performance when she met the prefect and plotted a diversion to remove the gun powder that was prone to explode in case of bombing. However, the prefect couldn't solve the gun powder issue unless she received enough signatures from the businesses from the neighborhood. Although Bernhardt achieved a certain notoriety, she knew that as a woman would have no authority requesting signatures alone. Therefore, she requested the Prefect's *paletot*:

Je fis un mouvement vers la porte et m'arrêtais hypnotisée par un paletot placé sur un fauteuil. Madame Guérard, qui avait suivi mon regard, me tira doucement par la manche. "Oh ma petite Sarah, ne faites pas cela! Mais je coulai un regard quémendeur vers le jeune préfet qui, ne comprenant pas, me dit "Qu'est-ce qu'il y a encore pour votre service, jolie Madame? Je montrai du doigt le paletot, me faisant aussi charmeuse que possible. "Je vous demande pardon, fit-il ahuri, je ne comprends pas du tout." Mon doigt restait tendu vers l'objet désigné: "Donnez-le moi? lui dis-je. -Mon paletot? -Oui. -Pourquoi faire? -Pour mes blessés convalescents." ... Je repris un peu vexée par ce rire inextinguible "Ce n'est pas drôle, ce que je dis là."il vida les poches de son paletot (214-215)

In this passage, Bernhardt transforms The Tuileries Palace into a theater where her seductive performance convinced the prefect to submit to her authority. First, movement exteriorizes her intentions and thoughts: "je coulai mon regard," "je

montrai du doigt,” and “mon doigt restait tendu vers l’object désigné” (215). Next, like the *femme fatale*, Bernhardt finds agency and a position of authority with just a few words “Ce n’est pas drôle ce que je dit là” before acquiring the *paletot*. Marcus further defines Bernhardt’s exteriorizing affect as “arresting facial expressions, vocal acrobatics, and extravagant bodily movements” which, as is illustrated in *Ma double vie*, Bernhardt exercised on the page, beyond the stage (300). Next, Bernhardt received more gifts and supplies from the prefect than she needed and returned to The Tuilerie Palace with the signatures which ultimately saved l’Odéon and healed injured French soldiers.⁷² The performance to receive the *paletot* created an emotional shift that caused the prefect to surrender his military jacket, a symbol of authority and social rank.

Sarah Bernhardt’s Engraved Belt: Containing the Truth

Ma double vie illustrates moments in Sarah’s life when clothes facilitated the success of the performance. During *Phèdre*, Bernhardt recounted a time she suffered from stage fright in front of the British audience:

Trois fois je me mis du rouge sur les joues, du noir aux yeux; trois fois je m’enlevais tout, d’un coup d’éponge. Je me trouvais laide. Je me trouvais maigre. Je me trouvais grande.... Je devins folle. Je n’avais pas mon voile. Je n’avais pas mes

⁷² It is unclear if Sarah Bernhardt used the *paletot* as a proof and credibility to show that she knew the prefect in order to receive the signatures, but it is implied because of the succession of events.

bagues. Ma ceinture de camées n'était pas attaché.... Mais le mot "J'oublie" me frappe au cerveau: Si j'allais oublié ce que j'allais dire! (401)

This passage gives the reader a new perspective on the actress' psychological state on stage. In fact, up to this point of *Ma double vie*, Bernhardt portrayed herself as achieving her goals through it all. Although Sarah's first performance of *Phèdre* in London was indeed a success,⁷³ I suggest that fully clothing the body with the veil, rings and particularly the engraved belt being unfastened triggered the stage fright. Here, the actress feels incomplete and therefore unable to perform. The unbuckled belt shows that Bernhardt needs her outfit. Fabric was like a second skin that gave her the power to embody any character. Without the extra layers, she is destabilized. Even though Bernhardt exteriorized her mesmerizing talent she was still a fragile human being who internalized the misrepresentations of her body. Marcus lists how body movement contributed to exteriorization, but I assert that this passage shows the body would be losing its momentum without a feeling of containment.

CRITICS OF SARAH BERNHARDT: FASHIONING THE SOCIAL BODY

In *Skin-Ego*, Didier Anzieu demonstrates that the skin is similar to the two layers of a shell: an internal layer that connects to the inner side of the body and an outer layer that serves as a protective shield (4). Additionally, the skin experiences a double sensation because it is both receptive and expressive. As a result, the skin has the ability to mediate the positive and the negative sensations onto the body by reacting. I compare this concept

⁷³ Bernhardt inserts critics' articles published in British and French journals. See *Ma double vie* 403-404

of double sensation to that of Bernhardt's reception by and expression towards the critics throughout her career. In fact, the actress was relentlessly the target of many criticisms, particularly with regards to her appearance and her extravagant outfits. In this second part, I expose the extent of the demeaning negative critics from caricaturists to journalists who, throughout her career, deconstructed Sarah's body publicly. Next, I explain how Bernhardt renegotiated the boundaries between the public and the private in *Ma double vie* and with the uplifting praises of contemporary artists, authors, friends, and lovers.

Deconstructing the Feminine Body: Unrealistic Body and Oppressive Critics

Caricatures: dismantling the body

Dismantling means to strip of a cloak. Even through clothes were depicted in excess, caricaturists used clothing to emphasize the actress' thin body and deconstructed the feminine body to fashion their own image of Bernhardt. I selected two caricatures to show this dismantlement: the first caricature (Illustration 7) was published in *L'hydropathe* in 1879 and portrayed Bernhardt in a costume, sitting on a chair in a manly manner, whereas the second caricature (Illustration 8) represented the actress in her notorious form-fitting day dress upon her arrival for the United States tour in 1880. I chose the second caricature (illustration 8) because the pattern on Bernhardt's notorious form-fitting dress resembles that of Napoleon Sarony's photograph for 1880 *Frou-Frou* (1869) (Illustration 11). In addition, *Frou-Frou* was the most acclaimed play during Bernhardt's American tour.

What interests me in these caricatures is that they establish a dialogue with previous photographs as well as Bernhardt's autobiography. While both drawings diminish the

actress' figure, the caricaturists emphasize the excess of fabric wrapped around Bernhardt's body. The volume of fabric such as the flounce enveloping the neck, wrists and feet of the actress, also draws attention towards the disproportionate size of the extremities. This ultimately fragments and distorts the feminine body: oversized head, tiny feet and wrists as small as the knees. Caricaturists and critics deconstructed Bernhardt's silhouette, but most importantly, they emphasized her thinness and highlighted her thin physiology and her Semitic traits with the intent to diminish the woman-actress at the height of her fame. In *Ma double vie*, Sarah Bernhardt compared her critics, caricaturists and advertisers to monsters who exploited her image on the basis of her fragile body:

Depuis, j'ai été livré aux monstres pieds et poings liés, et j'ai été encore accusée d'adorer la réclame. Quand on pense que mon premier titre à la réclame a été mon extraordinaire maigreur et ma fragile santé. J'avais à peine débuté, que les épigrammes, les calembours, les jeux de mots, les caricatures, s'en donnèrent à coeur joie....mon nom devint célèbre avant que je le fusse réellement. (*Ma double vie*, 425)

In this passage, Bernhardt confirmed that her physical vulnerability placed her at the mercy of the media at the beginning of her career. She also explained how the media fashioned her identity by exploiting the feminine, the masculine and sometimes the androgynous body.

This oppression can be observed in many caricatures depicting the actress. For instance, George Lorin's representation of Bernhardt (Illustration 7) was a critical response to Melandri's portrait of Bernhardt in sculptor's suit (Illustration

12). Carol Ockman described the androgynous facial features in this caricature and pointed at the short hair style as well the stereotypes of Jewishness, which according to Ockman, contributed to the decadence of women with creative aspirations (44). However, the excess of fabric wrapped around Bernhardt's neck divided the body in two distinctive parts: on the one hand, the oversized head surrounded by the frill and on the other hand, the miniaturized body. I assert that the drawing strokes within the frill, form an optical illusion that replaces the missing shoulders of the actress. The frills are drawn in such a way that it forms a muscular and robust stature leaning on the chair's spindle. Hence, the flounce that conceals most of Bernhardt's body has a double connotation that suggests both the feminine and masculine.

As a response to many criticisms towards Melandri's photographs, Bernhardt defended her creativity and preference for the suit in *Ma double vie*. First, she clarified that the costume gave her freedom of movement so that she could paint the walls of the new house that she purchased to be built: "Rien ne m'amuse plus que d'aller dès le matin avec lui [l'architecte] sur les chantiers ... je montais sur les échafaudages mouvants. Après, je montais sur les toits" (355). Not only did the actress supervise the constructions of her custom-made house, but she also asserted her financial independence as a modern entrepreneur. Next, this passage shared the good-natured friendship that she established with renowned artists⁷⁴ like George

⁷⁴ Bernhardt listed George Clairin, Escalier (architect), Duez, Picard, Butin, Jadin and Parrot as the artists who helped her decorate her new house. See *Ma double vie* 354; For the song "Oh peintres de la Dam'jolie,

Clairin and Ernest Duez who helped paint the new house and who even dedicated a song for the occasion (355-56). Therefore, Bernhardt proved that she was surrounded by powerful artists who, unlike the misogynist critics, respected her as their equal. Including anecdotes, names of powerful man authority, photographs in her costume in her memoirs gave Bernhardt more credibility and an opportunity to regain authority over the defamations she suffered throughout her career.



Illustration 7: Caricature of Sarah Bernhardt by George Lorin published in *Les hydropathes* April 5, 1879 (Ockman, 44).

De vos pinceaux arrêtez la folie! Il faut descendre des escabeaux, Vous nettoyer et vous faire beaux!” See *Ma double vie*, 355.



Illustration 8: Caricature of Sarah Bernhardt during her tour United States of America standing with a dog in left arm, right arm stretched back and dollar coins falling to feet. Appeared in *Chic* on October 27, 1880 (Harry Ransom Center).

Journalists: stripping Bernhardt's human nature

Critics objectified Bernhardt because of her thinness, but most importantly they dehumanized the actress' body and deprived her of sexual power. Critics compared her body to inanimate objects and communicated their ideas via riddles, puns, word play, synecdoche published in newspapers, magazines or journals. For example, Bernhardt has been compared to “un petit bâton surmonté d'une éponge” by Flaubert because of her frizzy untamed hair (*Ma double vie*, 425). The article “Le Livre des Convalescents” published in 1885 in the newspaper *La caricature*, compared her to matches and abased her achievements: “Sarah Bernhardt vient d'être nommée présidente de allumettes” (366). Coquelin Cadet invented a riddle that recreated a situation in a smokehouse where a person asks:

- Que fumez-vous là?
- Un Sarah Bernhardt
- Comprends pas
- Oui ... un *pur os*. (*La caricature*, 366)

Because Bernhardt had reached an international fame and travelled, this paronomasia (pun) compared the bony actress to an international Cuban cigar commodity that the industry calls “un puro” when a high-quality product is considered pure. Therefore, journalists and caricaturists dehumanized the feminine body and assigned a chimerical image that fabricated a double to her identity in La Belle Époque.

The thin looking silhouette of the actress wrapped in extravagant attire was the major focus of the newspapers' critics, to which Bernhardt responded and argued against in *Ma double vie* and ultimately had the last word. For instance, she transcribed Francisque

Sarcey's article published in *Le Temps* on November in 1872 in which incorporated her personal observation:

Ce fut une déception quand elle parut. Elle avait, par son costume, exagérée avec ostention une sveltesse qui est élégante sous les voiles aux larges plis des héroïnes grecques et romaines, mais déplaisante sous le costume moderne.... l'impression fut peu agréable de voir jaillir de ce long fourreau noir –j'avais l'air d'une fourmi— cette longue figure blanche d'où l'éclat des yeux avait disparu. (*Ma double vie*, 323)

Francisque Sarcey (1827-1899) contrasted antique draperies with modern attire. He criticized the incompatibility of Bernhardt's body with modern vestimentary selection because it highlighted the morbid characteristics of her body. Instead, the actress's loose draperies proved themselves to be a more elegant choice for her figure. In 1907, thirty-five years after the publication of Sarcey's article, Bernhardt interrupts the journalist's judgment to insert a comment: "j'avais l'air d'une fourmi" (323). This metonymy in which she compares herself to an ant, not only shows Bernhardt's ability to playfully redirect the criticisms, but her autobiography was also a medium of communication to regain authority over past defamation from journalists who, by 1907, has already passed away.

The third and last French journalist's review that I analyze was written by Albert Wolff (1835-1891), who accused Bernhardt's art of being a misleading publicity (1).⁷⁵ Besides, Wolff criticized the actress' masculine suit with an oppressive misogynist tone:

Mlle Bernhardt joue là un jeu dangereux et il se pourrait bien que, tôt ou tard, le public fit payer à la comédienne l'agacement que lui cause la femme, le sculpteur, le peintre, le critique d'art, et le courrieriste de Londres....par le fait de son exhibition en vareuse blanche, elle perd la sympathie, n'étaient les égards qu'on doit toujours à une femme, je dirais qu'elle perd le respect que nous avons pour l'artiste. (1)

In this passage, Wolff condemned Bernhardt's "vareuse blanche" outfit, her multiple talents as corruptive to society (Illustration 12), including the masculinity that she channeled. In similar fashion to George Sand's "redingote-guêrite," the word "vareuse" also referred to a military attire that soldiers wear in the navy.⁷⁶ While "la redingote-guêrite" gave Sand the power to penetrate the private and the public spaces in Paris in the 1830s, Bernhardt used the private space of her studio as a means to penetrate the mediatic public space and transgressed the moral values on gender and gender role.

⁷⁵ In this article, Wolff also criticized Francisque Sarcey for changing his mind about Sarah Bernhardt and praising her performances in London: "L'ami Sarcey a été changé. Ce n'est plus le Sarcey que nous connaissons et que nous aimons. L'autre jour il a aplati Rachel comme une limande en l'honneur de Sarah Bernhardt." See Wolff 1.

⁷⁶ "La redingote-guêrite" was designed by George Sand and has a military connotation since "gagner la guêrite" means finding refuge and a fortification in which soldiers retreat to observe the enemy and to defend the territory. Sand wore this "redingote" to find mobility in Paris and penetrate the public space. See *Histoire de ma vie* 1201.

Reconstructing the feminine body: friends' biographies as a sheltering overlay

Close friends of Sarah Bernhardt such as Reynaldo Hahn, Emile Zola, Madame Pierre Berton, Catulle Mendès, Anatole France, Edmond Rostand and Maurice Rostand to list a few, reconstructed Sarah Bernhardt's image and body by praising the essence of the actress' talents in their writing and biographies. Reynaldo Hahn published a posthumous diary *La Grande Sarah: Souvenirs* in which he recorded daily entries about the time he shared by the actress' side from 1895 to 1904.⁷⁷ Hahn best depicted the actress' unique figure during her performances and captured her natural talent in plays such as *La dame aux Camélias* and *La samaritaine* and declared that she "wore a new flounced dress with white mousseline which molded her very individual form, that form which introduced a new type of feminine grace" (2). Sarah's silhouette, according Hahn, established a type, which he called "The Sarah Bernhard-esque," and described her silhouette as "a bodice draped to her figure and a skirt that clings more tightly round the legs than round the hips, giving the appearance of encircling her in a spiral (27). "Sarah Bernhard-esque," and her dress contributed to fashioning this unique identity widely described by the press or caricatured (Illustration 8).

As Bernhardt's close friend and lover for over a decade, Edmond Rostand crystalized the actress' character in "Sonnet à Sarah" on December 1896, that described her as "Reine de l'attitude Princesse des gestes" and celebrated her ability to awaken the emotions of her audience (Maurice Rostand, v.4. 115). In his sonnet, Edmond Rostand not

⁷⁷ Reynaldo Hahn published *La grande Sarah: souvenirs* (1930) which was translated in English as by Ethel Thompson as *Sarah Bernhardt: impressions*.

only reconstructed the essence that the actress exteriorized on stage, but he also immortalized her resilience: “En ce temps sans folie, ardente, tu protestes” (v.5, 115). In a similar poem, Edmond Rostand’s son and playwright Maurice Rostand wept her absence in a posthumous tribute. Maurice eulogized Sarah’s talents, praised her energy and her everlasting youthful appearance which he described as “plus mince à soixante ans qu’aucun prince de vingt” (Rostand, 117). Finally, Anatole France reconstructed the power of the sexualized body and declared, “She acted with her entire body, she puts on soul, mind, physical grace and sexuality” (Ockman, 35). Here, Anatole France described in his own word the Skin-Ego exteriorized by actress, that is to say Bernhardt’s intended phantasy that she set in motion on stage. France’s metaphor shows that the author put on soul, grace and sexuality the same way she put on clothes. Hence, friends and collaborators of the actress redefine the boundaries of the feminine body that had been deconstructed for decades by critics, and therefore, the objectified feminine body regained a position of power by re-writing her own story through the eyes of others. Bernhardt was not only a modern woman and an entrepreneur with financial power, but she further fabricated several readings of her own stories through multiple platforms of communication and visual art during the rise of mass culture starting in 1880s.

SELF-FASHIONED IDENTITY IN VISUAL ARTS: CONNECTING TEXT AND TEXTILES

Draping the truth: concealing facts in visual art and in text

Soon after leaving Le Conservatoire at the beginning of her career, Bernhardt gave birth to a son, Maurice Bernhardt, on December 22, 1864. However, the woman-writer omitted this life changing event in *Ma double vie*. Instead, the actress suggested her desire to leave the stage for a vacation as a result of her poor performances in *Un mari qui lance sa femme* (1864). Indeed, Bernhardt described the feeling of emptiness during this period of her life that showed “ni succès, ni insuccès” but most importantly, Sarah declared “je passais inaperçue” (*Ma double vie*, 116). Using Anzieu’s idea of inner and outer skin, we see that this passage illustrates the imbalance from the social body, that is to say, the lack of public attention, which negatively impacted Bernhardt, causing the actress to experience a period of neurosis following this experience. Additionally, her mother disdained the play and was disappointed in Sarah’s performance saying “tu étais ridicule dans ta princesse russe! Et tu m’as fait un profond chagrin” (116). Her mother’s opinion no doubt contributed to her decision to travel to Spain.

When Sarah travelled to Spain to give birth to Maurice, she concealed her pregnancy from the public eye and even in 1864, when Nadar captured Bernhardt’s portrait, she masked any signs of motherhood (Illustrations 9 and 10). In fact, the draping on the series of personal pictures displayed a new style that differed from the intricate high fashion and ornamental style Bernhardt exhibited in the cabinet photographs for the rest of her

career. The actress not only hid her pregnancy from the pages of *Ma double vie*, but she also camouflaged the dawn of motherhood her under the folds of a thick draping.

Two series of photographs were captured by Nadar: one with a black velvet and the other with a white colored draping. I selected these two illustrations because the black and the white draping are both antithetical and create a contrast that describe the duplicity of Sarah's personality both on-stage but also off the stage. On the one hand, the velvet fabric covers the hands and immortalizes the face of the actress as if she were a sculpted bust. Additionally, the feminine body disappears beneath the draperies that cover two-thirds of the space on the image. The plunging fabric below the collar bone exposes Bernhardt's cleavage and draws the viewer's attention towards the absence of undergarment while still hiding her pregnancy. Both photographs exude sensuality and serenity with her hair untied while the drapery and the white column set up a theme of antiquity and classicism, which Bernhardt would later recreate during her collaboration with Alphonse Mucha in the 1890s for the lithographs such as *Gismonda* for Le Théâtre de la Renaissance.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ According to the archives of cabinet photographs I have seen, 1864 was the only moment Bernhardt posed with her hair untied without ornaments or a hat.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Illustration 9: Photograph of Sarah Bernhardt by Nadar in 1864. The description states “à mi-corps, le profil à gauche, drappée de velours noir” (Bibliothèque Nationale de France). 79

⁷⁹ <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb17727367j>



Illustration 10: Photography of Sarah Bernhardt by Nadar in 1864. The description states “mi-jambe, le visage de face, les mains posées sur une colonne (Bibliothèque Nationale de France).

The Woman as Dress: Sarah Bernhardt Channeling Her Wealth

The dresses that were depicted in the text, photographs and lithographs carried a message of wealth and prosperity as a response to the critics. Among the Parisian aristocracy, women's clothes concealed the silhouette beyond recognition which also explained women's eagerness to escape reality (Richardson, 242). As a consequence of the

Industrial Revolution and Imperialism, women's clothes were no longer made to enhance their beauty by the end of the 1870s but, rather, to display their wealth (241). In 1880, Sarah Bernhardt had gained fame worldwide after her tour in the United States. Her financial independence allowed her extravagant spending habits on fashionable clothing, properties, jewelry and exotic pets. The actress hired a couturier with whom she designed custom made dresses for the plays and public appearances (Simon Bacchi, 81). This collaboration helped the actress assert her personal vestimentary signature. In *La grande Sarah. Souvenirs*, for instance, music composer and contemporary critic Renaldo Hahn depicted Bernhardt's embodiment of the dress:

Cette forme de jupe qu'elle a inventée et qu'elle garde en dépit des changements de la mode est réussie: cette forme serrée aux jambes et qui finit par un élargissement aux chevilles. Cette ligne onduleuse est la principale caractéristique de la silhouette de Sarah Bernhardt. (Simon Bacchi, 43)

Despite the change in fashion trends, Bernhardt was adamant in her commitment to a fitted mermaid dress, creating therefore her identifiable symbolic silhouette. Critics, contemporaries and authors such as Emile Zola and Marcel Proust often compared Bernhardt's thinness to the morphology of a serpent (Ockman, 29). Indeed, the actress' exceeding long arms and legs appeared as a pattern on most caricatures (Illustration 8).

I assert that Bernhardt turned the negative criticism regarding her body into a powerful trait as much as a weapon to attract the public's attention. Drapery, I further contend, always played a part in the self-fashioning of this public identity like that of a protective second skin that was exposed to the public. Emile Zola criticized the layers of

fabric in Clairin's 1876 portrait of Bernhardt. In fact, the actress' serpentine posture, he described, made it impossible to distinguish the position of her side, knees or ankles; Zola added: "Je sais bien que Mme Bernhardt passe pour la personne la plus maigre de France! mais ce n'est pas une raison pour l'allonger sur un canapé de telle façon que son peignoir paraisse ne recouvrir aucun corps" (*Deux expositions d'art au mois de mai: Salon 1876*).

Similarly, Bernhardt designed a mermaid day dress in 1880 for her role in *Frou-Frou* (Illustration 11).⁸⁰ Here, the dress molded Bernhardt's body in such ways that the actress' silhouette is the dress with her signature serpentine posture. The dress appears to be inseparable from her body as it covers the entire skin and ends with a train. Most importantly, Bernhardt gazes at the curtain that hangs from the support and lies on a high table which creates therefore an hourglass shape that mirrors the actress' thin waist. This parallel between the curtain and the actress' dress conveys the representation of inverted yin and yang symbol. In fact, the feet of the table are visible and are on the opposite side of the actress' face but whose feet are concealed. Additionally, the pattern on the white dress matches the pattern on the drapery with inverted colors. The drapes of the curtain and the drapes of the dress both blend in the theatrical decors as upholstery. This photograph emphasizes on the idea that Bernhardt's body is camouflaged on the stage. In fact, the theater was also a protective layer in Bernhardt's life. In *Ma double vie*, the actress explained the theater's sheltering feeling as though she was part of the décor and reaches the divine:

⁸⁰ *Frou-frou* was a play in five acts written by Meilhac and Halévy in 1869.

C'est avec une véritable joie que j'escaladais les marches froides et fendillées et que je me dirigeais vite vers ma loge, distribuant des bonjours en courant. Puis dégagee de mon manteau, de mon chapeau, de mes gants, je bondissais sur la scène, heureuse d'être enfin dans cette ombre infinie. (*Ma double vie*, 169)

Unlike the overdressed image of the actress depicted by critics and the public, this passage is a rare moment that demonstrates Bernhardt's enthusiasm to undress, shedding her outerwear to take her place on the stage, where she felt at ease in the theatrical environment. Bernhardt frees herself from the protective outer garment (hat, gloves and coat) before she jumps on stage wrapped in an infinite shadow. This metonymy of the stage as "cette ombre infinie" indicates a place where reality and divine infinity coalesce. For Bernhardt, the stage serves as a sheltering layer of comfort. The theater was as much of a safe space for Bernhardt to perform fictional characters, as the space created by structure of the draping fabric around the Bernhardt's body.



Illustration 11: Sarah Bernhardt in “Frou-frou” 1880 by Napoleon Sarony (Ockman, 41).

Undraping the Actress: Unveiling the Gender-Bending Poly-Artist In a Suit

Sarah Bernhardt and George Sand not only shared similar traits, but they also subverted social norms when they decided to wear men's attire. Indeed, Sand wore her famous redingote-guêrite to penetrate the Parisian public and private space, whereas Bernhardt scheduled a session with Melandri who photographed the actress in her sculptor's suit in the comfort of her personal studio in order to market herself via the duplication of cabinet card. Although she played both male and female roles on stage, Bernhardt asserted her gender bending opinion in these series of provocative photographs, which resulted in the press criticizing this androgynous style through numerous caricatures (Emboden, 34).

I selected this photograph captured in 1876 by Melandri as a start my analysis on the topic of textiles as text in *Ma double vie* because it illustrates the actress' versatility. I convey that Bernhardt's outfit was a calculated mix-and-match that blurred the line between the feminine and the masculine to challenge gender dress codes and gender roles. After 1870, she became "sociétaire" and the actress reduced her time on stage after playing *Gabrielle* and soon found success as a sculptor. In this picture that challenged the media, Bernhardt transgressed the binaries in a satin suit, scarf, French heels with bows in pompadour heels style. Bernhardt's body position leans forward towards a sculpture of herself.



Illustration 12: Sarah Bernhardt in her personal studio by Mélandri 1876 (Harry Ransom Center)

The doubling of Bernhardt's face is relevant for the rest of our analysis because on the one hand, the bronze statue without body incarnates the everlasting, the ageless and the immovable power of her famous name, face and success as "La Divine" and on the other hand, the woman standing in full androgynous attire as the human behind the success. I compare the narrative of this photograph between the bust and the human to Bernhardt's narration of *Ma double vie*, in which the autobiographical "I" characterizes the everlasting established identity of Sarah Bernhardt as La Divine whereas the human double represents the mobility of this identity thanks to fabric and accessories.

While Bernhardt's gaze stares at the camera and challenges the viewer, she also threatens the audience by carrying a sharp sculpting object in her right hand. The sharp sculpting object represents a phallic shape that is positioned between the actress' legs and displaces gender identity as well as gender role as a woman sculptor. While she leans on her elbow comfortably, the left foot is on a step carefully placed to re-create a climbing motion which symbolizes social ascension. Her body, fully clothed, only exposes the pale skin of her face which contrasts with the dark bronze bust, her opposite. In this portrait, the white suit not only indicates wealth and authority, but Bernhardt occupies a position of sexual power and social transgression as a woman artist who found autonomy in a different artistic field than her major career as an actress. The photograph of the sculptor with her tools in hand next to the statue both simulates a recent carving and therefore I suggest, emphasizes the idea of Bernhardt as the self-made woman.

In 1907, Sarah Bernhardt published her autobiography as *Ma double vie: mémoires de Sarah Bernhardt*, but it also included the subtitle "avec de nombreuses illustrations dont

certaines en couleur.” In fact, the author carefully selected a diversity of illustrations such as photographs , paintings, portraits, drawings, locations, and personal art, to list a few, which she aligned chronologically with the autobiographical content.⁸¹ These illustrations, in dialogue with the text, are similar to a movement initiated by magazines such as *Fémina* and *La Vie Heureuse* during La Belle Epoque. Rachel Mesch explains that as women took on new roles in society, both magazines began to deliver an infinite spectacle of modern femininity in various disciplines such as sports, goodwill and acts of heroism (16-17). Most importantly, both magazines presented a new interchangeable aesthetic that emphasized text and images and therefore, I assert that Bernhardt also followed this feminine aesthetic movement of presenting information to the public by joining illustrations, as well as theatrical programs, journal articles, poems composed by admirers as well as abasing advertisements such as the poster for sandwiches in New Haven that stated “VENEZ VOIR L’énorme Cétacé que Sarah Bernhardt a tué en lui arrachant des balaines pour ses corsets...” (505). Bernhardt concluded *Ma double vie* with a summary of her assets (2,667,600 francs) earned from her American tour, as well as the number of performances, which counted one hundred and fifty-six, including sixty-five for *La Dame aux Camélias* and forty-one for *Frou-Frou* (*Ma double vie*, 578). What the actress taught the

⁸¹ For the photograph from 1879 and in her travel costume on her way to the United States in 1880, see (); For the first portrait of the book was Bernhardt in the costume as Adrienne Lecouvreur, see (); for the portrait of herself as a child standing next to her mother Youle, see (); for garden’s convent at Grand-Champs and Le Conservatoire, see () and ().

contemporary audience of 1907 was that through it all, she was financial powerhouse, an independent artist and the epitome of the modern woman entrepreneur of La Belle Époque.

The influence of Art Nouveau in Bernhardt's *Ma double vie*.

Bernhardt self-fashioned an autobiography and a lifestyle that were both influenced by *art nouveau*. The aesthetic movement, which was a symbol of liberal style and decadence, flourished in Europe, particularly in Paris, during the last two decades of the nineteenth century and while Bernhardt was an icon at the peak of her fame. The characteristics of *art nouveau* are not only akin to Bernhardt's public exposure and lifestyle such as eccentricity and the serpentine mannerisms I previously discussed, but they also transpire in *Ma double vie*. In *Belle Époque: Paris in the Nineties*, Raymond Rudorff explains that *art nouveau* used "long, flowing and interlacing linear patterns that were inspired by natural shapes such as plants and flowers as well as natural movements" (305). Those linear patterns and decorations, Rudorff continues, were characterized by intertwining drooping lines, otherworldly and exaggerated refinements of designs like the serpentine line which suggested eccentricity and confusion (305). These traits that define *art nouveau* reappear in a written form in Bernhardt's autobiography in which, I posit, the actress adapted her writing style to a trendy new aesthetic that owed nothing to the past. In fact, the purpose of *art nouveau* was, according to Rudorff, "to be in harmony with the spirit of a world being transformed by the industrial machine age" and "to provide a new environment for everyday living" which were both ideas that Bernhardt lived by to self-fashion her identity from the multitude of cabinet cards reproduced, to lithographs (304).

Bernhardt's writing style and details in *Ma double vie* convey aesthetic characteristics of Art Nouveau. The first trait of *art nouveau* is "the long, flowing and interlacing linear patterns," like that of drapery and the natural shape of plants, drives Bernhardt's discourse. The first-person narrator is the heroine in her long, flowing and linear adventure through which the narrator establishes an autobiographical style and identity. Unlike George Sand's *Histoire de ma vie*, Bernhardt omits long transgressions and details about the moral and intellectual portraits of friends and entourage. Instead, the narrator briefly describes the individuals in her life like a fleeting encounter before redirecting the focus towards her life events. The plot tells the story of Bernhardt's rise to fame and theatrical roles through a sequence of chronological events and actions that unfold swiftly from play to play, location to location and a succession of heroic deeds. For instance, in chapter sixteen, Bernhardt narrates the phases to save The Odéon Theater and French soldiers during the Communes: she installed the infirmary, met at the war ministry with prefect Kératry, collected a permit to access food provisions for the community, stole the officer's Paletot, rearranged l'Odéon to accommodate injured soldiers and healed countless of them (210-221). This sequence of action sets a cadence to the narrative and, in similar fashion to Art Nouveau and its natural movement, Bernhardt attempts to prove that her life was based on free flowing mobility instead of domesticity and restraint.

Hence, the narrative "I" is the center of the plot, the same way Mucha portrayed Bernhardt standing alone in the spotlight in the lithographs for the play *Gismonda* (1894) (Illustration 14). From 1890-1905 Bernhardt collaborated with Alphonse Mucha, the gifted graphic artist who created lithographs such as *La samaritaine* (1897), and *La dame aux*

Camélias (1896) that came to represent the quintessence of the genre of *art nouveau* in posters. In *Alphonse Mucha: Masterworks*, Rosalind Ormiston presents the progress of Mucha's *art nouveau* and explains Bernhardt's influence on Mucha's career and vice versa (94). Mucha's lithographs advertised Bernhardt's theatrical plays and ultimately brought success to both the actress and the artist. I convey that it is no coincidence that Bernhardt began to write her autobiography in 1898, the same period when Mucha produced a series of lithographs in which drapery is prominent and the artist's patterns coincide with Bernhardt's affinity for drapery.⁸² Mucha's lithographs keep a close resemblance to the original format of *Gismonda*, that is to say full-length figure, facing and challenging the viewer, emphasizing that drapery was her primary choice of garment. When Alphonse Mucha drew the first sketch of the actress in 1890 many controversies surrounded these initial drawings because of Bernhardt's perfectionism and personal vision, but the longterm collaboration proves that both artists participated in an aesthetic trend of an era.

The second characteristic of *art nouveau* present in *Ma double vie* is that Bernhardt's linear narrative patterns interlace between facts and fiction, and by this I mean that Bernhardt self-fashions a narrative "I" that plays the role of "le caractère fictif de la personne qui dit 'je'" to use Lejeune's words (20). Hence, Bernhardt performs a theatrical role that Lejeune calls "the narrative 'I' between quotation marks" instead of the autobiographical first person (without the quotation marks). Like a drapery that lets the

⁸² For Mucha's different series of lithographs where drapery is the main style of clothing, see Ormiston for *The Seasons* (1896) 14-15; *The Flowers* (1898) 36-37; *The Times of the Day* (1899) 56-57; and *Precious Stones* (76-77).

audience see the forms of the feminine figure instead of exposing the skin (illustration 13), Bernhardt's *Ma double vie* appears to be a shape of an autobiographical corpus, but brings an extra layer of fabric that complicates the generic expectations. In "Sarah Bernhardt: Artist and Mythologist," Debra Charlton declares that Bernhardt was "A skilled raconteur who....personally orchestrated her biographical legend by circulating a tantalizing mixture of colorful facts, misleading half-truth and outright inventions about her past" and who "displayed a paradoxical talent for pairing unflinching self-exposure with selective fabling" (Charlton, 14). Therefore, in similar fashion to the interlacing stems of the plants that characterize the art nouveau style, visible on Gismonda's costume (Illustration 14), Bernhardt's written lines of true facts intertwine with lines of fiction in *Ma double vie* construct an autobiography that brings confusion to the audience.



Illustration 13: Times of the Day: Brightness of the Day by Alphonse Mucha, 1899
colour lithograph (Ormiston, 56).



Illustration 14: *Gismonda* representing Sarah Bernhardt by Alphonse Mucha. Lithograph (Omiston, 94).

It is clear that Sarah Bernhardt internalized the distorted body image conveyed by her critics and a complex upbringing, but in *Ma double vie*, the actress shows that she used it as a weapon to stand tall. She took what they perceived as her weakness and made it into her strength. Her difference, her thinness, was what she used to propel her career but most importantly, it wouldn't have been the same without the strategic choices of textiles. Fabric as drapery was Bernhardt's second skin to bypass the norms. Her weak body was unhealthy as she reiterates in *Ma double vie* as well as many friends' accounts. However, her figure also gave her the opportunity to play the role of a young boy (*L'Aiglon*) and by the same token, to subvert the limiting and often demeaning mindset entailed by the profession.

Chapter 3: Colette's Living Fabric: Embroidering Stories, Reclaiming Authority from *Claudine à l'école* (1900) to *La maison de Claudine* (1922)

“...je formai en moi, avec l'habitude de travailler,
un caractère de raccommodeuse de porcelaines”
(Colette, *Mes apprentissages*, 68)

“...by following the thread of analogies and symbols
in a given piece of literature, we rediscover a thematic
that is more imaginary than discursive,
more affective than rational,
and less close to the concept than to desire; [...] what one then discovers is a plastic continuity,
the movement of a meaning embodied in various
representations, images, metaphors”
(Michel Foucault, 150)

INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the influence of embroidery and the message communicated using fabric and clothing (the language of clothing) in Gabrielle-Sidonie Colette's first work of auto-fiction, *Claudine à l'école* of 1900, and in *La Vagabonde*, published in 1910. In the preface to Le Fleuron edition of the *Claudine* series published in 1948, Colette revealed that her husband, Henri Gauthier-Villars, better known by his pen name Willy, had recommended, early in their marriage, that she record in a notebook her memories of primary school (11-13). Two years later, Colette explains, Willy opened a drawer and rediscovered the notebooks which now seemed interesting to him because of the financial difficulties he was experiencing. Seeing the potential piquancy of her childhood tales for contemporary readers, he asked his wife to add some spicy details to the plot before sending

them to the publishers. In this way, Willy secured the publication of *Claudine à l'école* by Ollentoff in 1900, but rather than identifying his wife as the author of the popular volume, Willy claimed the authorial rights for *Claudine à l'école* as his own. As Colette noted in the 1948 Le Fleuron preface, Willy “signa je ne sais combien de volumes sans en avoir écrit aucun” (11). Because Colette had no access to the considerable earnings from the Claudine series, she was left penniless following her separation from Willy in 1907 (Veil, 69). Compelled to work at a music-hall to make ends meet, the newly independent Colette recounts her experiences as a mime in *La vagabonde*. Published in *La vie Parisienne* from May to October of 1910, *La vagabonde* was often perceived as “un roman vengeance” due to Colette’s on-going divorce from Willy which was finalized concurrently in July 1910 (Pichois, 179).

Since Colette’s personal life highly influenced the writing of her novels, I will argue that autobiography and fiction illuminate each other in *Claudine à l'école* and in *La vagabonde*, works that bookend her marriage to Willy. To understand Colette’s manner of playing with her audience and critics, as she shuttles between true and false autobiographical facts --which I suggest is, in fact, a performance-- I will use Jerry Aline Flieger’s definitions of the difference between autobiographical fiction and fictional autobiography. Flieger characterized the *Claudine* series and *La vagabonde* as autobiographical fictions, a form, she argues, that puts forth autobiographical material in which the protagonist does not identify as the author but draws from personal experience to create the story (5). Unlike the *Claudine* series and *La vagabonde*, Colette’s later work published after 1920, such as *La maison de Claudine* (1922), *Mes apprentissages* (1936)

and *Broderie ancienne* (1944) are fictional autobiographies in which, as Flieger puts it, Colette is the “I” at the center who writes the tales of those ostensibly true stories that reveal new facts about the biographical person.⁸³ I will argue that Colette’s textual “I” is not bound to a definite genre, but rather, it goes beyond the limitations that both autobiographical fiction and fictional autobiography entail. Instead, the author creates a *métissage* of fictional autobiographies and autobiographical fictions so that disparate facts and identities of the author both connect, coalesce and take a new form that alters meaning across Colette’s texts. I further argue that the narrative “I” fluctuates within a matrix between autobiography and fiction, through what I call a performance in which the author *se met en scène* inside and outside the text.⁸⁴

MATRIX OF MEANING(S) AND CONTEXT

This matrix, by definition, represents a space where something else originates, takes form and develops.⁸⁵ I call this idea of matrix Colette’s *matrix of meaning(s)* and I apply this concept to three situations: first, a page on which the writer creates an authorial identity; secondly, a neutral canvas on which the weaver creates a space to embroider an artistic creation; and thirdly, a stage on which a mime creates a narrative through movement. I will show how the author used all three to self-fashion her identity as an

⁸³ For instance, Colette’s mother, Sido appears as a common character in these stories as well as family members friends, and contemporary authors, artists, and performers.

⁸⁴ The stage performance as a mime in *La Chair* (reality) influenced the writing of *La vagabonde* (fiction) and vice versa.

⁸⁵ A matrix is something within or from which something else originates, develops, or takes form. Germain Brée calls fiction of autobiography “a matrix of fabulation,” see Brée, See Miller, “Writing fictions: Women’s autobiography in France” (60)

author, and by examining the ways in which Colette used this space to originate, to form and to develop as woman-author, as a performer and as an artist from the publication of *Claudine à l'école* to *La vagabonde*. Using Julia Kristeva's theory of signification of the symbolic and the semiotic, I will argue that Colette's *matrix of meanings(s)* serves as an imaginary canvas that the author embroidered as a form of metaphor throughout her career, but particularly in the *Claudine* series (1900-1904) and *La vagabonde* (1910), as well as the three later works (*La maison de Claudine*'s "La couseuse," *Mes apprentissages* and *Broderie ancienne*). I observe that as the author moved towards an autonomous self and shifted from a position of abject marginality to a position of active subjectivity, the theme of embroidering became ever more apparent over the years.⁸⁶ What was primarily a rejection of the feminine traditions in *Claudine à l'école* slowly became re-assimilated in Colette's later works to invent a transcendent writing style that reflected the writer's self-fashioning: her *fabrique de soi*.

I also connect this *matrix of meaning(s)* to what Kristeva calls Chōra. As posited by Kristeva, the Chōra, a pre-signifying maternal state, counters phallogocentrism because it reassimilates the characteristics of environmental and bodily experiences that have been repressed. From *Claudine à l'école* to *Broderie ancienne* I will show how Colette re-assimilated what had been repressed by Willy. In other words, Chōra leads to a defetishization of the masculine *logos* through the incursion of the semiotic Chōra into the

⁸⁶ The abject is a term used by Kristeva to defines abjection as a phase when an infant rejects or is being separated from the mother's body in order to prepare to enter the Symbolic, see Sullivan *Weaving the Word*, 36.

symbolic which, as Kristeva further emphasizes, can only materialize thanks to invention (Rickert, 261). Kristeva invites us to see choric invention as a particular form of genesis prior to the symbolic. Thomas Rickert explores Kristeva's choric invention as a beginning and claims that Chōra is "invention *inventing* itself" (263). I will apply Rickert's idea to show that following her separation from Willy, Colette's literary invention challenged the masculine logos in ways that allow the narrative "I" to keep on reinventing itself via multiple networks that oscillate between autobiographical fiction and fictional autobiography, like that of the invisible canvas on which the weaver's thread finds her own agency to embroider her own story.

Throughout her career, Colette experimented with the genres through which she wished to establish herself as an author, as she sought a means to stand apart from the hegemony of a male dominated canon, particularly her contemporaries. In *La vagabonde* in particular, Colette self-fashioned a narrative "I" that connected to a third genre beyond words: one that consisted of an unwritten performance on stage as a mime in *La Chair*.⁸⁷ Nancy K. Miller declares that "not to read the fiction *with* the autobiography is to remain prisoner of a canon that bars women from their own text" and, as a result, she insists that an extensive reading of the facts and fictions that surround the author is necessary (60). Hence, following Colette's divorce from Willy in 1907, I will argue, Colette intertwined an *in-text* and *out-of-text* narrative self-fashioning, in what I call an autobiographical

⁸⁷ Kristeva's article "Le sujet en procès", attempts to discern the actual experience of the subject, which breaks out of the enclosure of its individuality thanks to its ability to set itself in motion, and in language that expresses a dynamic (83).

performance. In the pages to follow, I analyze the author's *fabrique de soi*, which originates within this matrix, both in the semi-autobiographical texts and in Colette's incorporation of woven textiles in her literary works, as well as in real life.

In 1936, five years after Willy passed away, Colette published an autobiography entitled *Mes apprentissages: ce que Claudine n'a pas dit*.⁸⁸ In this work, Colette depicted colorful scenes of la Belle Époque in which she revived memories of writers, acquaintances and friends who influenced her life and work, such as the actress Caroline Otero as well as Polaire, who played *Claudine at school* at the theater. But most importantly, *Mes apprentissages* is a recollection of memories from 1893 to 1906 when Colette was married to Willy. The autobiographical work intertwined her husband's influence on the (self-) fashioning of her authorial career starting with the *Claudine* series. In the passage below, Colette not only reveals the conditions under which Willy pressured her to write, but also reflects upon how this experience affected her as an apprentice writer:

...je formai en moi, avec l'habitude de travailler, un caractère de raccommodeuse de porcelaines. Quel atelier qu'une geôle !...et le bruit de la clef tournée dans la serrure, et la liberté rendue quatre heures après....Ces détails de captivité quotidienne ne sont pas à mon honneur,... Après tout, la fenêtre n'était pas grillagée,... Paix, donc, sur cette main, morte à présent, qui n'hésitait pas à tourner la clef dans la serrure. (*Mes apprentissages*, 68)

⁸⁸ The subtitle "*ce que Claudine n'a pas dit*" was removed from the subsequent editions along with the photographic illustrations Colette included in 1936. See Engelking 125.

I am interested in this passage because this memory highlights Colette's work ethic and the context that shaped her personae while she was under the watchful eye of Willy's literary enterprise as another ghostwriter. Despite what many would call an abusive relationship—Colette's being locked in a room four hours a day to pen the *Claudine* stories, her husband's complete control over the financial success of the *Claudines*, as well as numerous affairs outside of his marriage --*Mes apprentissages* was not motivated by revenge against Willy as most readers and critics expected (Engelking, 130).⁸⁹ Instead, Colette set a humble tone, using various euphemisms which downplayed her achievements and put memories of Willy's story as one of the major themes.⁹⁰ In this book, the woman-author's intentions, I suggest, was to prove that she not only found closure after decades of conflict with Willy following their divorce in 1909, but she also forgave his numerous affairs.⁹¹ The publication of *Mes apprentissages* in 1936 was a work in which Colette, now a sixty-three-year old respected author, asserted her authority and confirmed her maturity by expressing her gratitude towards her ex-husband. In fact, without Willy, she proposes (perhaps with a hint of irony), Colette would not exist:

⁸⁹ *Mes apprentissages* was first published in the weekly magazine *Marianne* in 1935 in which Colette responds to critics with curtesy. She requested that the director *Marianne* insert her response to Jacques Gauthier-Villars' letter who defended his father's legacy. In my opinion, this gesture shows Colette's maturity as a writer's quest for credibility. See Pichois 356.

⁹⁰ Colette attenuates the truth "Dès son apparition, *Claudine à l'école* se vendit bien. Puis encore mieux. La série paraît-il, se vend encore, après avoir épuisé des centaines d'éditions..." In reality each book from the *Claudine* series sold an average of 55,000 copies for each title in 1907 only, and that Willy earned 43,200F in four years (Pichois 112).

⁹¹ During the winter of 1894, Colette received an anonymous letter with a date and location where she could catch her husband having an affair with his mistress Charlotte Kinceler. See Thurman 72.

C'est à elle [la main de Willy] que je dois mon art le plus certain, qui n'est pas celui d'écrire, mais l'art domestique de savoir attendre, dissimuler, de ramasser des miettes, reconstruire, recoller, redorer, changer en mieux-aller le pis-aller, perdre et regagner dans le même instant le goût frivole de vivre... J'ai appris surtout à réussir entre quatre murs presque toutes les évasions. (*Mes apprentissages*, 68)

This passage shows that the outcome of these oppressive years served a greater purpose and that the porcelain mender in captivity, as Colette called herself, learned life-changing skills: mastering artifice as a form of feminine ingenuity to find freedom. This metaphor compares the technique of writing text to a woman's ability to craft as a means to repair and to conceal the chipped fragments of broken pottery as a means to make it whole again.

Being "la raccommodeuse" is a domestic skill that most French women had in common at the beginning of the twentieth century and the invocation of this metaphor, based on the art of needlework and domesticity, shows Colette's analeptic intention to connect her early writing with femininity and women in the society during la Belle Époque. I claim that, in *Mes apprentissages*, Colette darned the ultimate piece of torn fabric following Willy's passing in 1931. Additionally, I assert that the author camouflaged other subversive messages since the publication of *Claudine à l'école* with the view to regain authority and to find her voice not only as an author but also as a performer. In her article, Tama Engelking demonstrates that the author of *Mes apprentissages* continues to wear a mask and that even in 1936, "there is no real Colette" because the author is still a performed identity (125). While Engelking emphasizes the performative features of *Mes apprentissages*, I focus on author's performativity inside the text in connection to textiles,

particularly the manner in which Colette manipulated language to connect two conflicting worlds in ways that challenge the binaries: the female and male author, woman writer and domestic life, gender roles, concrete and abstract as well as reality and the imaginary.⁹²

First, I contend that the 1936 *Mes apprentissages* was an autobiographical novel that served two distinct functions: on the one hand, it sought to reconcile Colette's emotional resentment for Willy, and on the other hand, it reconnected Colette with Claudine after years of distancing her identity from the fictional character as we will discuss in the pages to follow.⁹³ In the chapter "L'écriture sexuée," Carmen Boustani analyzes the influence of word play and demonstrates that Colette communicated ideas via metaphors (210). Colette, according to Bousani, "parle par métaphores Elle aime se dire dans les sons qui ne sont pas finalité et cherche un autrement dit dans une écriture qui se repère à des champs féminins" (211). "La raccomodeuse de porcelaine" is indeed a complex metaphor in which Colette used the image of domestic skills to define her writing skills, reflecting on the intersections between these two seemingly separate spheres. Hence, Colette implies that mending shattered pieces, polishing the fragments and disguising the seams between the cracks are equally relevant terms for her efforts in the home and on the page. In fact, the word "raccomodeuse" has three connotations: to sew fabric, to repair damaged objects and to "patch things up" as a means to resolve conflicts between two

⁹² By performative features, I mean the pictures that Colette selected as illustrations for *Mes apprentissages* which, as Engelking pointed, were all performers in their costumes (131).

⁹³ Colette spent decades distancing herself from the Claudine image and rejected the autobiographical categorization of her work. In 1926, the author signed a copy of *Claudine à l'école* addressed to Frederic Levevre in which she emphasized "Ne prenez pas ce vieux roman pour une autobiographie," see Levevre 135.

human beings. Consequently, the polysemy of the noun indicates the author's intention to use text as layers of connotations that resolved past conflicts.

Secondly, the plurality of meanings of “la raccommodeuse” depends on the context but turns on a feminine point of reference that brings life to the visual object implied: the needle. In her book, Boustani further characterizes Colette as “une fée du langage” whose metaphors attribute “le sens des réalités précises et transforme les mots qui opèrent sur des notions, en objets pouvant être perçus par les sens” (Boustani, 213).⁹⁴ Following Boustani's observation, I claim that the word “la raccommodeuse” conveys a tangible reality but at the same time, the noun suggests multiple meanings pointing simultaneously to different functions such as gluing fragments of faience, stitching fabric, or reconciling individuals depending on the context of ceramic art, needlework art, or social skills. Colette, as Boustani continues, “aime se dire dans des sons qui ne sont pas finalité et cherche autrement dit dans une écriture qui se repère à des champs typiquement féminins” (211). This femininity in Colette's work is implied or inscribed through the influence of needlework and textiles and I will show how the author converts the original function of weaving into a tool for rebelling against an oppressive system (Sullivan, *Weaving the Word* 137). When she penned *Mes apprentissages*, Colette was an established author and this memoir proves that her writing style always brought two worlds together: text and textiles which ultimately intertwines the masculine and the feminine.

⁹⁴ Colette brings a sense of precise reality, but her metaphors transform words in such ways that they operate on different notions into objects that can be perceived by readers through the process of synesthesia.

Through observations and experiences, Colette learned to navigate through a society dominated by men. Her work as a writer taught her adaptability, flexibility and performativity which later echoed in her performances as a mime in *La Chair*, her responsibilities as a mother, as well as in her later literary works like *La vagabonde* and *La maison de Claudine*. In fact, “la fée du langage” learned to master the use of puns, which was also one of Willy’s best rhetorical skills. In her biography of Colette, Judith Thurman explains that during la Belle Epoque, puns were considered anarchic and that Willy’s puns were “a little bomb lodged in a serious text, which exploded its pretensions” (46). Colette created her own paronomasias in her 1936 autobiography. Using a metaphor of text and textiles, the author not only portrayed herself as a darning and implied that needlework craft inspired her writing skills, but she also disguised the art behind two words that she stitched together in the title: “appren” “tissages”. Learning to weave (*apprendre les tissages*) taught “la raccomodeuse” various techniques to subvert the limitations imposed by phallogentric discourses, and as a result, she created an identity that deviates from the dominant discourse.

The title *Mes apprentissages* is thus a subtle pun that not only pays tribute to Willy, but also, I argue, signals that for Colette, writing represented a type of weaving that she disguised in her work throughout her career like a *métaphore filée* that used needlework as a model on a chronological frieze. In this sense, Colette’s *Claudine* series, *La vagabonde*, *La maison de Claudine* and *Mes apprentissages* create, metaphorically, a form of tapestry on which the author embroiders the self-fashioning of her authorial identity. Locked away by Willy and forced to produce a text, Colette operated from the margins and stayed on the

margins while she weaved/wrote what she was forbidden to more openly reveal in the form of a metaphor of the semiotic: she was the author of the *Claudines*. Colette lived removed as an invisible writer from the literary factory as Willy's ghostwriter, and yet, she was still a part of it, as she attended social events of the literary circle, Parisian salons and interacted with authors, performers and as Willy's wife. Therefore, Colette the woman-author might be considered in terms of the abject of the Symbolic. Elizabeth Grosz defines the abject as "an (un)malleable pre-oppositional permeable barrier that requires some mode of control or exclusion to keep it at a safe distance from the symbolic and its orderly proceeding" (93). Colette negotiated the semiotic drives for years as a means to accommodate them into the symbolic through a system of signs that she recuperated in a *métaphore filée* of needlework (or other fragments) following the publication of *La vagabonde* and later work in life, that is to say, when she fully entered the Symbolic realm as an author.

To explain how Colette uses embroidery as a form of tapestry and conveyed meaning through a system of signs, I would like to take the popular Bayeux Tapestry as a visual model. Indeed, the eleventh-century artwork is called "tapestry" because of its size, two-hundred and thirty feet long and twenty inches wide, but the needlework is an embroidery.⁹⁵ The work merges art, needlework as well as a narrative that epitomized the rivalries between two countries at war, France and England⁹⁶. The embroidery reconstructs the Norman conquest of England in 1066 in which William the Conqueror defeated King

⁹⁵ See The Bayeux Museum in France

Herold's troops at the battle of Hastings to reclaim the throne that he inherited, was promised and was the heir. However, William had to face numerous rebellions before securing the throne in 1072 (Julaud, 127). This embroidered story of William reconquering a territory that belonged to him by law draws similarities with the tensions between Willy and Colette regarding the *Claudines*: Colette's dispossession of her authorial rights, her challenges to regain authority over the series, and her conquest to establish a respected authority as an author.

The embroidered Bayeux Tapestry narrates the historical event and belongs to the collective memory in a form of art and decoration. The design recounts details of the events surrounding the battle of Hastings. Similarly, Colette created an imaginary canvas, a *matrix of meanings(s)* is what I call it, on which the author embroidered her story as a form of metaphor with the goal to communicate Willy's oppressions as well as how she regained authority. In her preface to *Tapestry: The Mirror of Civilization*, Phyllis Ackerman defines tapestries as "living objects of aesthetic perception," "images of surviving echoes," "records of the habits, amusements, follies" and "reflections of marked individuals, in their greatness and their failures" (V). I maintain that these values of this form of textiles are the characteristics that Colette portrays in her writing: life of a woman-author, the habits of an époque, and the reflection on her experiences.

In December of 1944, Colette published four short autobiographical stories in a volume entitled *Broderie ancienne*, in which the narrator contemplated anecdotes shared with her family (her mother Sido, her father, her brothers Achille and Leo, Henry de Jouvenel). One of the stories, "Les noces," recounts the events of her wedding to Willy in

May 1893. Unlike the names of other relatives and friends, Willy was not mentioned in “Les nocces.” Instead, the narrator referred to him as “mon mari.” In “les nocces” Colette proved that she found peace by being capable of reliving the day of her wedding with vivid details, and most importantly as the subject of her own story. Elements of clothing and details in *Claudine en ménage* serve as an intertext in *Broderie ancienne* through the nuance of colors of textiles. For example, the stained white wedding dress is depicted as “le corsage éclaboussé d’oeillets rouges” in *Claudine en ménage* and as “un rayon violet et rose sur mes gants blancs” (40; 383). Colors of clothes appear more vividly and assert more authority in *Broderie ancienne*. The purple and pink blend into a scarlet color that stains the bride’s white gloves depicted in *Claudine en ménage* is similar to the splashed red stain from the spashed carnation flowers on the wedding dress in *Broderie ancienne*. Unlike the theme foreshadowed in the title, *Broderie ancienne* is not a handbook on needlework; in fact, the theme of embroidery is absent. However, in similar fashion to *Mes apprentissages*, the title is a second hint from the author that needlework conveys a silent message and takes a larger meaning that is interlinked to the time of the *Claudine* series (like the Bayeux Tapestry that connects various historical events of battles). Embroidering, as Jane Graves declares, tested the skill of persistence and is defined as inherently feminine (119). It involves sewing threads in an ornamental pattern that is, according to Kathryn Ledbetter, sometimes raised or inlaid below, and may include objects such as beads (31). Hence, from the bold Claudine at school who refused to embroider the initial G because the teacher’s assistant reprimanded and belittled her skill, to the seventy-one-year old Colette who reflected on the past in *Broderie ancienne*, I will show how the art of

embroidery influenced Colette's writing. Indeed, the author intertwined text and textiles to subvert the autofiction genre and to create a *métissage* of genre that embroidered her identity and authority as an author. Colette transcended her time to remind society that a woman's voice cannot be controlled, imprisoned or silenced.

COLETTE AND NEEDLEWORK

Rejecting the Art of Needlework Publicly

Unlike George Sand, who briefly discussed the therapeutic benefits of needlework and limited disclosing her passion for broderie, tapestry and dress making in *Histoire de ma vie*, Colette, in contrast, reiterates unapologetically her aversion for needlework in her autobiographies and autofictions. *Claudine à l'école*, the first novel of the *Claudine* series published in 1900, introduced a young heroine who discarded the mandatory sewing course of the school curriculum and openly voiced her apathy: "On sonne" says Claudine, "nous rentrons pour l'assomante leçon de travail d'aiguille. Je prends ma tapisserie, avec dégoût" (68). Fifteen- year-old Claudine further negotiated the completion of her in-class sewing exam with a classmate: "Je grogne devant cet énoncé Heureusement, je recours à un procédé ingénieux et simple: je donne des pastilles à Luce qui coud divinement, et elle m'exécute un G mirifique. 'Il faut entraider'" (109). Twenty-two years after the publication of *Claudine à l'école*, Colette still declared a similar disdain in the autobiographical story "La couseuse," published in *La maison de Claudine* (1922), in which the author-narrator hesitates to allow her daughter to sew: "J'écirai la vérité: je n'aime pas beaucoup que ma

filles couse” (154). Even though the author had established her authority by 1922, we observe that Colette’s opinion on the art of needlework is left unchanged.

Regaining Authority Over Silencing: Embroidery as an Alternative Discourse

In her early writing, Colette openly rejects the practice of needlework, but the theme of *les travaux d’aiguille* nonetheless reemerges and takes a strong influence within the plot in *Claudine à l’école*, *La vagabonde* and *La maison de Claudine*. My goal in this chapter is to investigate the power of needlework as a silent, subversive feminine discourse that connects all three works. I claim that embroidering is an authoritative type of needlework because the design embroidered can disguise a message within the decorative function of the art. These three texts in particular, convey a constant tension between the semiotic and the symbolic and by this I mean that Colette uses textiles (semiotic) as a strategy to regain a position of authority by invading the realm of male art and signification.

Colette transgressed the boundaries of limitations placed on the feminine crafts, in order to self-fashion her authorial identity. Stephanie Schechner investigates Colette’s development as a woman and as a writer from *Claudine à l’école* to *La maison de Claudine* and questions the reasons that drove the young woman to keep on writing after her separation from Willy (75). Schechner proves that the process of writing was to Colette a way to solve internal conflicts and to find herself by intertwining both life and written words (75). Because Colette received formal and informal education in the countryside, which mostly taught her to become a housewife and a mother, she renounced what she was trained to do once Willy “forced” her to write (Schechner, 75). This informal education

also entailed crafting, gardening, cooking and reading as part of the countryside's leisure activities in Saint-Sauveur. Despite her extensive list of book publications, Colette did not believe that her destiny was to be a writer, and as a result I believe that she was more influenced by crafting. In *Journal à rebours* (1941) Colette confessed that “Dans ma jeunesse, je n’ai *jamaïs* désiré écrire. ... Je n’ai pas eu 19 ou 20 pour un devoir de style ... Car je sentais, chaque jour mieux, je sentais que j’étais justement faite pour *ne pas* écrire” (144-145). Similarly, Colette’s heroine Claudine is more often tempted to spill the inkpot to disrupt the lessons, to entertain or to escape school assignments than using this ink to write⁹⁷ (*Claudine à l’école*, 60 ; 83). According to *Journal rebours*, and Colette’s fictional character Claudine, the author-narrator publicly revealed her lack of desire to write at the beginning of her career, but I also convey that Colette quietly infused her feminine domestic activities like needlework into her writing style as an alternative discourse.

Philomela’s and Philomène’s Embroideries: Taking Revenge on The Rape

My analysis takes a closer look at the strategies that Colette set in her text to bypass the oppressive impediment of being silenced, through a network of intertexts. First, I will study the dialogue between Colette’s “La couseuse” and Balzac’s *Albert Savarus* through the character of Philomène de Watteville. Colette confesses her anxieties regarding Bel-Gazou’s passion for broderie and fearfully compares her daughter to “ces jeunes fille

⁹⁷ In *Claudine à l’école* the narrator disrupts the course of the lesson by spilling her ink supply “Mais que devient donc la petite Aimée? Il faut que je sache. Donc je renverse avec adresse un encrier sur la table en pregnant soin de me tacher les doigts abodamment” (60) and later “...je songe à renverser l’encrier, à déchirer la page de mon livre, à crier “Vive l’Anarchie!” (83).

brodeuses d'autrefois" such as "Philomène de Watteville et son canevas sur lequel elle dessinait la perte et le désespoir d'Albert Savarus" (*La maison de Claudine*, 155). Next, I will investigate the trope embodied by Philomène in Ovid's story of Philomela, Procné and Tereus in *Metamorphoses*. Even though both female protagonists carefully elaborated a strategy that caused the fall of a male figure of authority, Philomène weaves a canvas that is invisible in *Albert Savarus*, whereas the original Philomela, who was first raped by Tereus and then silenced forever when the latter cut-off her tongue, wove the tale of Tereus' crime with "pure white threads and purple strands" on a tapestry. Despite the visibility or the invisibility of the woven canvas in Balzac's or Ovid's work, the trope of Philomela shows that the technique learned from needlework served as a strategy that played a significant part in the (re)invention of the characters. On the one hand, Philomène and Philomela reclaimed their agency in their respective narratives to overthrow oppression and to regain a position of subjectivity. On the other hand, the female protagonists also experienced physical and moral metamorphosis (a point that I discuss in the third part).

I perceive Willy's action as a literary rape which I herein contrast with Tereus' rape of Philomela before he silenced her in Ovid's *Metamorphosis*. In fact, Ovid's Greek princess Philomela was kidnapped and raped by her brother-in-law Tereus who later cut Philomela's tongue so that she could not unveil the truth to her sister Procné. However, Philomela, imprisoned by Tereus in a little cabin in the woods, wove the tragedy of her own fate and her inscribed location on a dress (tapestry) before she sent it to her sister Procné as an anonymous present to the palace. When Procné received the dress, she understood the narrative woven on the dress and freed her sister Philomela. Hence, the

cloth traveled from the Philomela's place of confinement to the palace unnoticed and carried a woven secret message which ultimately resulted in Philomela's freedom. The Willy-Colette collaboration left Colette with no authorial rights and no access to the considerable earnings from the *Claudine* series. In the autobiography, *Mes apprentissages* (1936), Colette shares Willy's words "You should jot down your memories of elementary school. Don't be afraid of spicy details, perhaps I can make something of them. Funds are low" (35). In similar fashion to Tereus, Willy not only banned Colette from speaking the truth but he also, metaphorically, stripped the woman-author of her imminent success, before selfishly exploiting the text without consent.

Drawing from the trope in *Albert Savarus* and *Metamorphoses*, Ovid and Balzac showed that textiles serve as a space for an embroiderer to inscribe a text and to hide a message. I convey that textiles in Colette's written works withhold meaning and pieces of evidence regarding Willy's oppression by connecting later work to *Claudine à l'école*. Text and textiles are closely connected and even though Colette resented needlework, I assert that *les travaux d'aiguille* influenced her writing technique. I suggest that the embroidered fabric and choice of clothing, inside the work of *Claudine à l'école*, *La vagabonde* and *La maison de Claudine* (or outside the text during performance in *La Chair*) served continuously as a medium for Colette to, metaphorically, metamorphose into a new subject, to regain a new authorial position, and last but not least, to disrupt the male authority that silenced her. Not only had Willy silenced Colette on her actual authorship of the *Claudine* novels, later, when Willy and Colette were separated, he commanded Paul Hémon to burn

the manuscripts.⁹⁸ This action eliminated evidence of his wife's handwriting and the editing that Willy had brought to *Claudine à l'école*. Meanwhile he kept the financial profit (Veil, 68-69).⁹⁹

Hence, I suggest that *La maison de Claudine*, first published in 1922, is an autobiographical work that broke Colette's silence regarding the *Claudine* series prior to regaining her authority as well as her authorial rights. In *La maison de Claudine*, Colette wrote a chapter entitled "La couseuse" in which she explored the theme of embroidering. In the story, her daughter Bel-Gazou embroiders on the canvas a form that resembles "des points de chaînette" which, as Colette describes, zigzags on the canvas like "pointillés" (dots) on a road map (153-155). These series of dots wander on the fabric and Colette's comparison to a road map not only refers to the recurring textual ellipsis in this story but the series of dots that zigzags across the fabric also connects to the works of *La vagabonde* and *Claudine à l'école* as a form of intertext. On the one hand both Colette and Renée, the protagonist in *La vagabonde*, embarked on a road trip across the major cities of France to perform pantomime in theaters. These "pointillés" in *La vagabonde* also connect to the footsteps of the mime that wanders freely across the stage. In my opinion, the series of dots is a recollection of memories that brings a nostalgic atmosphere to the text. On the other hand, the zigzags embroidered on fabric in *La maison de Claudine* draw parallels

⁹⁸ Colette wrote a preface to *Claudine à l'école* published in 1949 and stated "Sur les quatres Claudine, seuls les manuscrits de *Claudine en ménage* et de *Claudine s'en va* ont été sauvés d'une destruction ordonnée par Willy à Paul Barlet, dit Paul Héon, secrétaire, ami, ... fort honnête garçon qui suspendit l'exécution commencée et m'apporta le demeurant, que je possède encore." See Le Fleuron edition 11.

⁹⁹ The first novel also silenced the Parisian elite around the couple such as Catulle Mendès and Ollendorf who knew that Colette penned *Claudine à l'école*, *Claudine à Paris*, *Claudine en ménage* and *Claudine s'en va*, which also shows Willy's authority over a woman of the salons. See Viel 69.

with the *fissure* that splits the bedroom wall in *Claudine à l'école*. Here, the zigzagging of the “pointillés” on the canvas connect to the fissure on the wall as if the items of the story connect to one another. For instance, Claudine describes “la lézarde ... qui sillonne le mur neuf, à gauche du lit, de haut en bas” (*Claudine à l'école*, 84) which also points at a metaphor and a pun that connotes one of the schoolgirl's loss of virginity (84). Hence, I claim that in similar fashion to Balzac's Philomène, Colette embroiders an invisible canvas that becomes a vehicle for these thoughts to become words, but the author also establishes a metaphor *filée* that uses needlework to connect words to previous works. Moreover, Colette demonstrates that weaving connects to the truth and ultimately broke the ongoing silence with her daughter. Hence, silent thoughts become words as Bel-Gazou embroiders *la chainette*.

The theme of needlework in Colette's works

I contend that being silenced encourages women like Colette to find other subversive mediums of communication such as textiles whose meaning deviates from the symbolic and challenges the norms. Scholars such as Julia Kristeva, Claude Pichois, Judith Thurman and Marie-Jeanne Viel to list a few, have completed an extensive research on Colette's life, literary career, performances as a mime, her subversive acts, and her relationships, but few have analyzed the influence of needlework on and in her literary works. In her book *George Sand et Colette, affinités et passions*, one critic, Chantal Pommier, dedicated a chapter entitled “Broderie, couture...” in which she compares both women-authors and *les travaux d'aiguille* in context. Pommier states that unlike George

Sand, whose passion for needlework flourished while she expected her first son Maurice and felt urge to knit a collection of layettes, Colette in contrast pictured Bel-Gazou naked and bought “une sobre et pratique layette anglaise” at the last minute “par superstition” as she declares in her latest autobiography *L’Etoile Vesper* (234).

Furthermore, I claim that the subject of needlework provokes a dysfunctional discourse between mother and daughter. In fact, there exists a strong authority from Colette’s mother, Sido, who convinced her daughter of the futility of needlework which may have caused Colette to experience a change of heart for *les travaux d’aiguille*. Pommier explains that during her childhood, Colette “aurait certainement pu s’avérer aussi douée pour coudre que pour broder” but “Sido découragea son ardeur à pratiquer la couture” (*L’étoile Vesper*, 234). Yet, Sido sewed. In the story “La fille de mon père” Colette describes this authority and states that “Elle [Sido] laissait parfois tomber sur ses genoux son livre ou son aiguille et m’envoyait par-dessus ses lunettes un regard ... quasi soupçonneux” (*La maison de Claudine*, 56). Meanwhile, Colette never portrays herself engaged in needlework. In “La couseuse” for instance, the mother simply observes Bel-Gazou. I will show that Colette subverts her mother’s authority the same way Bel-Gazou challenges Colette’s when she embroiders. In fact, in *La maison de Claudine*, the short stories “La fille de mon père” and “La couseuse” mirror one another and Sido is a reflection of young Bel Gazou through Colette’s eyes. I will explore the mother-daughter bond as well as the message that transpires on gender-role in “La couseuse”.

La maison de Claudine is a short collection of autobiographical stories often undervalued and much is left to be explored by scholars. The sequence of flashbacks

represents a tale that is connected to a familiar place for its reader, Claudine's house in Saint-Sauveur, where the plot for *Claudine à l'école* took place. The novel sets a nostalgic tone by drawing from past events with a variety of emotions from its author. *La maison de Claudine* not only is, in my opinion, a prequel to *Mes apprentissages, ce que Claudine n'a pas dit* published in 1935, but it is also form of *roman vengeance* for the freedom of expression that Colette did not have access to because of Willy. The structure is organized by chapters that are connected to a part of *Claudine* like an invisible thread that triggers the curiosity of the reader about Claudine who has evolved into a mature, independent and established woman-writer. This invisible thread connects time between both novels.

La maison de Claudine collapses time to connect with Colette's very first work of her career, *Claudine à l'école* and, I suggest, Colette reclaims her authority for the first time in *La maison de Claudine*. In her article, Catherine Slawy-Sutton analyzes the theme of silence that dominates most short stories in *La maison de Claudine* (299). The critic studies the symbolic of language and discusses the cleavage between the children's and the adults' mode of communication. In contrast, my analysis explores textiles as a vehicle for language. I claim that needlework such as tapestry and embroidery carry a message in order to break the silence and taboo topics in connection with *Claudine à l'école* regarding the *Claudine* series. Starting in 1905, Colette persisted in dissociating herself from the fictional character so that she could establish a career as an independent woman-writer and evolve into a new first-person narrator like Renée Néré in her next most popular novel *La vagabonde* in 1910.

In *La maison de Claudine*, the author-narrator calls herself Minet-Chéri, which was the nickname given to Colette by her mother Sido. Because Claudine is absent from the stories and the fictional character's name only appears in the title *La maison de Claudine*, Colette provokes a distance in genre between the 1900 autofiction and the 1922 autobiography. Hence, reusing the fictional character's name in the title and the first edition of *La maison de Claudine* in 1922, not only revisited Colette's childhood memories in Saint-Sauveur, but it was also, in my opinion, an authorial marketing strategy to reclaim her authority over the *Claudine* series.

Embroidering Fabric: The canvas as a Vehicle for Thoughts and Change

I suggest that at the beginning of her career, after she married Willy, Colette's first writing demoted the primary domestic activity imposed on women of different social status during the nineteenth century. In my opinion, the woman-writer persisted in her quest to annul the stereotype of needlework as a form of education, a rite of passage to womanhood and as a validation for marriage, a fact that the reader experiences in 1900 *Claudine à l'école*. In contrast, in 1922 "la couseuse" promotes the art of embroidering as a care-free leisure that not only encourages creativity but also subverts any preconceived structure implied by instructions or guidelines for needlework. Hence, I observe that Colette reclaims needlework as a leisure activity and even fears its power. Indeed, Colette sympathizes with Bel-Gazou's imperfectly embroidered design that the author describes as "tout de travers," and "difformes" (153-156). Even though Bel-Gazou neglects her canvas, as Colette observes, the mother refrains from correcting Bel-Gazou's technique.

In “La couseuse,” the nine-year-old’s silence suggests more of an impending threat than the askew design and alternatively, the mother contemplates the idea of disrupting her daughter’s momentum to embroider: “A quel moment faut-il que je lance un ‘hep!’ qui coupe brutalement l’élan?” (155). Next, the ponderous silence associated with the relentless “va et vient” of the needle both prompt the image of Balzac’s fictional character Philomène de Watteville and causes Colette to ask: “A quoi penses-tu Bel-Gazou?” to which her daughter answers “A rien” before questioning her mother about marriage, divorce and the behavior of heterosexual couples (155). Breaking the silence by initiating a dialogue demonstrates that the mother plays the role of the mediator to recover what is lost: language. Consequently, the canvas in Bel-Gazou’s hands not only serves as a language barrier but it also operates as a platform for communication thanks to which both mother and daughter connect or disconnect. Colette’s “La couseuse” breaks with the tradition of the authoritative mother and advocates for a mother-daughter relationship that is grounded on complicity, creativity and communication instead of conspiracy.

The embroidered canvas designed by Colette’s daughter not only served as a medium of communication as I previously demonstrated, but the design on the fabric also shares details of intertextuality with the narrative of *Claudine à l’école*. Foucault claimed that “by following the thread of analogies and symbols” in a given piece of literature “what one discovers is a plastic continuity, the movement embodied in various representations, images and metaphors” (150). The analogies between *Claudine à l’école* and *La maison de Claudine* are represented through embroidering the thread on the fabric. Textiles, according to Kathryn Sullivan, are similar to a sheet of paper and convey meaning using a

language that consists of a grammar of fiber and design (11). As a result, I suggest that Colette used a “grammar of fiber and design” to connect to her previous work of the *Claudine* series, in order to reclaim her authorial authority. I will show how textiles are a medium of communication that carries a message in order to recover a memory that was violated by Willy in 1900.

The embroidery that is introduced in “La couseuse” conveys an intertextual synecdoche. When Colette compares the thread pinned on the fabric to “le pointillé” “difforme” “zigzagant d’une carte routière,” I observed that the simile that describes the dots on a road map as an irregular line draws parallels with a passage of *Claudine à l’école*, in which Claudine’s class is preoccupied with a fissure on the wall of the school in Montigny. On that day, the headmistress, Mlle Sergent, sent Claudine’s love interest, Mlle Aimée Lantenay, with a city hall delegate Mr. Dutertre to evaluate the damage in the bedroom:

“Vous constaterez facilement la lézarde dont je vous parlais; elle sillonne le mur neuf, à gauche du lit, de haut en bas” [...] je reste abasourdie et je me demande ce qu’elle espère, en envoyant ce coureur de jupons et cette jeune fille, ensemble, constater dans sa chambre une lézarde qui, j’en jurerais, n’existe pas. “En voilà une histoire de fissure!” [...] Je vois d’ici M Dutertre qui mesure la largeur de la fissure.

- Tu crois qu’elle est large la fissure? demande naïvement Marie Belhomme qui fignoie ses chaînes de montagnes en roulant sur la carte un crayon à dessin taillé inégalement.” (*Claudine à l’école*, 84-85)

In this excerpt, the meaning of the fissure on the school wall can be interpreted in three ways: the figurative sexual connotation (loss of virginity), the literal split on the school wall that, as I will discuss connect text with textiles, and ultimately, the loophole in the protocol and ethics of the French educational system for women.

First, the literal meaning of the symbolic split is the detail that I focus on to explain the intertextual link between “la couseuse” and *Claudine à l’école*. In fact, the scene in both texts presents four intertextual elements: a split, a map, a chain and the irregularity of the crafting process that unfolds in the narrative. For instance, in *Claudine à l’école*, the mountain chain that is drawn on the map by Marie Belhomme is replicated in “La couseuse” as the zigzagging chain being embroidered on a canvas by Bel-Gazou.

Furthermore, “la lézarde”, “la carte”, “la chaîne” and the pencil sharpened “inégalement” in *Claudine à l’école* convey displacement. Indeed, each element occupies a different location in the descriptive narrative space. For instance, the fissure on the wall is discovered outside of the classroom and the pencil that is irregularly sharpened next to the map. Additionally, this displacement is also present in the syntax of the sentence structure “Marie Belhomme qui fignole ses chaînes de montagnes en roulant sur la carte un crayon à dessin taillé inégalement” (85) ¹⁰⁰. Here, the gerund “en roulant” is displaced and separated from the direct object “un crayon” as much as the adverbial phrase of place is shifted from its corresponding direct object “ses chaînes de montagnes” (85). In contrast,

¹⁰⁰ In “Marie Belhomme qui fignole ses chaînes de montagnes en roulant sur la carte un crayon” the sentence structure uses the present participle connected to the pencil doing the actions, creates a rupture between the mountain chains and the map: “... qui fignole ses chaînes de montagnes sur la carte en roulant un crayon à dessin bien taillé” (*Claudine à l’école*, 85).

“La couseuse” suggests unity instead of displacement. Indeed, the chain of stitches that zigzags unevenly are embroidered within the space of the canvas. To me, this lack of disorder in the text suggests an atmosphere of harmony and confirms Colette’s established identity as a writer in 1922.

Because the intertext shows that Colette’s “La couseuse” and *Claudine à l’école* are in dialogue, Bel-Gazou’s canvas in “La couseuse” interconnects with *Claudine à l’école* as a synecdoche. Indeed, the details on the embroidery (the line of dots zigzagging crookedly) echo with the elements at Claudine’s school and therefore, in my opinion, the canvas depicted in “La couseuse” becomes a part of 1900 *Claudine à l’école* the same way a piece of a puzzle fills in a blank space to complete the general design and reinforces the whole structure of what was previously assembled. The result of a persevering observation, as the author-narrator of “La couseuse” states to describe her progeny’s woven work, brings Bel-Gazou to portray characters of her surroundings on the fabric, the same way Colette’s Claudine depicted her peers and instructors at school on the pages of *Claudine à l’école*.

Scholars such as Stephanie Schechner and Catherine Slawy-Sutton argue that *La maison de Claudine* served as a pedagogical tool and they compare each chapter to a “vignette” with themes that are recycled throughout the book (Slawvy-Sutton, 299). I agree that the themes contribute to the general unity of *La maison de Claudine*, but I also suggest that the stories in “La couseuse” are in dialogue with previous work and that *la maison* and *l’école* are connected on a literary level through “la lézarde.” The fissure and its symbolic meaning pertain to both structures: Claudine’s house and Claudine’s school. Because the

embroidered canvas that Bel-Gazou holds, represents “des images, des associations de noms et de personnes, tous les résultat d’une patiente observation,” I propose that Colette uses elements from *Claudine à l’école* to reconnect the reader’s memory with her past works in order to confirm her authorial authenticity. “La fissure” communicates a split in a particular structure that conveys weakness and instability in *Claudine à l’école*.

From “à l’école” to “la maison,” Colette asserts that during the intervening twenty-two years she has built a strong foundation and that this fissure on the school wall is later recovered as it is sealed with the needle on Bel-Gazou’s canvas in “La couseuse” (155). Following Kathryn Sullivan’s statement that, “textiles, like a sheet of paper convey meaning, their language consisting of a grammar of fiber, design” I assert that the “chainette” is an embroidered design that articulates “piqûre par piquêre” a grammar on fabric (the ellipsis, as we will discuss in the next part) (Sullivan, *Weaving the Word* 11). Moreover, this design connotes a deeper meaning in the texts while it recovers details from the past through language. As a result, Colette uses a *métissage* of fabrics to close the gap that separated both publications, but most importantly, Bel-Gazou’s thread of “pointillés zigzagants” sealed Claudine’s “histoire de fissure,” particularly the details left unresolved with Willy regarding the *Claudine* series.

In my opinion, this instability came as a form of fissure in the textual structure and inside the text was caused by the tensions endured during the writing and the publication of *Claudine à l’école*. The definition for “la lézarde,” a literal or figurative crack in French also has multiple meanings. First, in literature, “la lézarde” symbolizes a fissure that compromises the solidity of a work, while in the language registry of needlework it

represents “un petit galon servant à cacher les coutures” and translates into a “hem cover.” Hence, the emphasis on the fissure in *Claudine à l'école* and the ambivalence of its meaning to the context of needlework show that the author plays with fabric and the double identity of words to create a double meaning.

In the introduction I noted that both Colette and Claudine discarded needlework. In *Claudine à l'école*, Claudine complains about the assignment's instructions for the final exam of the school year which primarily consisted in embroidering the initial letter G. Yet, Claudine manages to complete the task except for the initial letter: “la boutonnière, le surjet, je m'en tire encore, mais l'ourlet à points devant et l'initiale au point de marque, je ne les ‘perle’ pas” (109). Hence, Colette negotiates with Luce so that the classmate completes the work for her. The passage using needlework creates a parallel between embroidering and writing the letter G which is also the first initial of the woman-author's name: Gabrielle Sidonie Colette. The author could have easily selected a different word choice such as “la lettre G” but instead, she wrote “l'initiale G” which indicates the beginning of author's signature in writing. However, Claudine's inability to sew the initial to complete the exam symbolizes the restrictions imposed by Willy regarding the author of the *Claudine* serie. Willy signed the Claudine series the same way Luce enbroidered the initial G for the protagonist so that the authorial identity is blurred between the lines and the threads.

MOTHER-DAUGHTER BONDS : (DIS) CONNECTED DOTS

Ellipsis: written and woven silence

Bel-Gazou proceeded with weaving stitches on the canvas and slowly embroidered a dotted line. The “chainette,” Colette describes, forms a broken line of “pointillés” that zigzags on the fabric and represents the sequences of written ellipsis in the text of “La coususe.” The “pointillés” on the embroidered canvas appeared in the text under the form of repeated textual dots in such ways that both signifier (the word “pointillés”) and the signified (the punctuation “...”) are present in the text.¹⁰¹ Thus, the series of ellipsis in the short story creates a pattern that interlocks concrete words with abstract thoughts and can be interpreted three ways: first as a written and non-written text; secondly as (silent) thoughts and spoken words exchanged between Colette and Bel-Gazou, and finally, the ellipsis can be interpreted as both textual punctuation and stitched dots on the canvas. In her article “Symbol, Pattern and the Unconscious: The Search for Meaning,” Jane Graves concludes that a pattern conveys nightmare as well as pleasure (122). I apply Graves’ argument to Colette’s description of the “pointillés” which suggests a textual and a textiles pattern that triggers both anxiety and gratification.

In fact, these ellipses not only symbolize the train of thoughts that the mother struggles to decode in her daughter’s mind, but they also express the mother’s distress and fear of loss while Bel-Gazou plies the needle: “Elle se tait, elle...Ecrivons donc le mot qui

¹⁰¹ The flow of the narrative discourse is interrupted by some sparse ellipsis “un carré d’étoffe aux doigts...” “Elle se tait, elle...Ecrivons le” “Silence..” (twice) “ou fuir avec un passant...” “le désespoir d’Albert Savarus...” “Oui...Non...” “tu comprends...” “l’enfant interrogée crument, les yeux grands ouverts...” See *La maison de Claudine* 154-156.

me fait peur: elle pense”, “Silence...” (154). The mother fears that Bel-Gazou might follow Philomène’s foot steps and run away with a stranger (155). I agree with Stephanie Schechner who compares the stitches to the steps on the path that leads away from the mother, as well as the anxiety Colette might have felt when she left Sido to move to Paris after marrying Willy (83). Henceforth, the ellipsis embodies the silence that disrupts the mother-daughter relationship in the narrative, and by this I mean the gaps that separate the mother from the daughter mentally, emotionally and physically. Consequently, the ellipsis not only interlinks written and woven design of “pointillées,” but the pattern also disrupts the narrative to express fear. Indeed, the omission of terms transfer the author’s anxiety onto the reader since the missing words bring density to the text and causes the reader’s imagination to assign words to Bel-Gazou’s thoughts in order to fill this textual silence. Ultimately, the embroidered canvas conveyed a silent platform of exchanged communication within the semiotic before Bel-Gazou’s thoughts come into language. The narrator explains that “le jeu d’aiguille” slowly leads to connection between thoughts and language barrier.

The *Claudine* series omitted the presence of the mother, but in 1922, *La maison de Claudine* presents a eulogy to Sido who is at the center of various plots and who particularly influenced Colette on domestic art.¹⁰² *La maison de Claudine* was Colette’s attempt to recover the mother’s body through textiles. When Colette lost Sido, she became a mother herself ten months later. In fact, Sido passed away in September 1912 and Bel-Gazou was

¹⁰² The translated version of *La maison de Claudine* is entitled *My mother’s house* in English

born in July 1913, but it is not until 1922, in *La maison de Claudine*, that Colette brought the mother figure as a character in her novel along with a flow of childhood memories (Kristeva, *Colette* 127). *La maison de Claudine* not only immortalized Sido, but Colette also reunited three generations of women in her narrative which she also connected through the art of needlework. Kathryn Sullivan's reading of Kristeva on the semiotic compares the separation between text and textiles to that of the child to the Mother and states that because the textile depends on the weaver who has already entered the Symbolic, and like Colette in 1922 who has found autonomy as an author, the textile incarnates the weaver's desire to represent the loss of the pre-oedipal Mother with a material body to warm and protect it (*Weaving the Word*, 36). Hence, textual and textiles in Colette's "La couseuse" represents Colette's longing and effort to recover a part of Sido. Kristeva explains that Colette uses the process of synesthesia and "brews up an imaginary fabric made of cretonne, smelling harsh soap, violet," which replaced what the parts of the mother that Colette missed. I suggest that needlework also created an imaginary fabric that connected text, women and triggered memories. Indeed, "La couseuse" and "La fille de mon père" are two stories that involved *les travaux d'aiguille* that connect three generations of women: Sido, Colette and Bel-Gazou.

Knowledge and the evil threads: thetic

Unlike Colette, who emphasized her disinterest towards *les travaux d'aiguille* in her written work, Bel-Gazou found a passion for embroidery. Stephanie Schechner argues that Bel-Gazou's mind drifts away from her work because the nine-year-old girl is

uninterested in needlework (84). In contrast, I argue that embroidering allows Bel-Gazou to discover a passion, since the young girl finds every opportunity during the day to sew--for instance, during bad weather, in the evening, before dinner, and on the beach as well as when she simply keeps her mother company (154). Julie Graves followed Lacan and Freud's theory and declared that the fear of castration is active in the unconscious minds of both sexes and is converted into fear of loss that is constantly reconstituted through the passage from infantile to adult life (122). In "La couseuse" Colette recounts her memory of Bel-Gazou who finds autonomy through weaving and who, using Kathryn Sullivan and Kristeva's theory, is in the process of breaking the *thetic* phase to negotiate the semiotic and the Symbolic as a means to find her place in the society by coming into language since weaving leads to dialogue (*Weaving the word*, 37). While her daughter found agency in the learning process of needlework along with a gift of observation, Colette feared losing control over her daughter's innocence.

Colette translates Bel-Gazou's increase in needlework activity instead of reading through a metaphor of illness, as though her daughter was victim of a plague that transforms her from inside out. In fact, she describes Bel-Gazou sitting "la bouche fermée cachant – lames à petites dents de scie logés au coeur humide d'un fruit," as though a demon took control of Colette's daughter. The demon in "La couseuse" is a metaphor for Bel-Gazou's passion for embroidery but it also symbolizes feminine puberty that the coming of age entails when it comes to change. In addition, Bel-Gazou questions her mother on marriage along with physical boundaries between a man and a woman, which brings Colette to

express her fear regarding knowledge and truth.¹⁰³ When she observed Bel-Gazou engaged in needlework, Colette describes her daughter's passion through the metaphor of illness that characterizes the feminine activity as "Mal nouveau" and "Fléau" which Colette cannot control.

(Dis) connection

The anxiety in "La couseuse" is the result of a disconnection that takes place between the mother and her daughter when Bel-Gazou began to sew. The author declares, "Bel-Gazou est muette quand elle coud ... Elle se tait, elle... écrivons donc le mot qui me fait peur: elle pense" (154). Because Colette cannot decipher her daughter's thoughts when Bel-Gazou embroiders, the author feared that her daughter would become like Balzac's character Philomène de Watteville. Indeed, nineteen-year-old Philomène stayed silent as she made her tapestry (slippers for her father) but she schemed an evil plan that sabotaged Albert Savarus' political campaign to run for mayor and ruined his long-distance love relationship with an Italian married princess. Consequently, the monster with "petites dents de scie logés au coeur humide d'un fruit" also embodied the fear that as she sews, Bel-Gazou transforms into Philomène de Watteville and in the process plots the mother's downfall. Through this literary trope, Colette shows that "l'autorité maternelle" threatens to destroy the mother-daughter bond and fails contribute to a positive outcome in the education of a child. Instead of introducing needlework as a chore, which triggers silence

¹⁰³ Bel Gazou questions her mother on couple's behaviors and compares two married couples who interacts differently. The truth and knowledge that Colette fears so much (besides the anxiety towards weaving) concerns her divorce to Henry de Jovenel in 1923 editor of the newspaper *Matin*.

and internalization due to a formal structure as Colette illustrated in *Claudine à l'école* and as Balzac presented it through the character of Philomène, Colette sympathizes with the leisurely and care-free characteristics of embroidery.

Needlework not only connected women of different social class and the domestic practice reinforced the bond between a mother and her daughter (as we discussed in the chapter on George Sand), but it also united women across cultures and traditions. The trope of Ovid's Philomela served as an intertext that sets authors to enter in dialogue across literary movements as a means to convey a new vision of the embroiderer across the centuries. Following the metaphor of text and textiles in "La couseuse" and *Albert Savarus*, I now explore the intertextuality between both work to show that "La couseuse" proposes a modern image of a young child, Bel-Gazou, who, unlike Colette, found pleasure in the feminine traditions of needlework. Indeed, Bel-Gazou is Colette's antagonist and as discussed, the young daughter in *La maison de Claudine* resembles Sido more than Colette.¹⁰⁴ Despite the silence and disconnections, "La couseuse" gives a modern example of the dynamic between the mother and her daughter and by the same token, subverts the traditional and conservative role of the phallic-mother that Balzac introduced in 1842 *Albert Savarus*.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, Colette transgresses and answers Balzac's questions on the education of young girls :

¹⁰⁴ Bel Gazou was born in July 1913

¹⁰⁵ In this story, Albert Savarus is the secondary character. Although the stories are similar, it is believed that Balzac tried to avoid any title reference to Ovid's story Philomèla. Therefore the author modified the title to *Rosalie (Albert Savarus)* and changed the name of the main character as well from Philomène to Rosalie. See, *Rosalie (Albert Savarus)* 30.

Doit-on éclairer les jeunes filles, doit-on comprimer leur esprit? il va sans dire que le système religieux est compresseur ... si vous les empêcher de penser...vous mettez cet esprit comprimé, si neuf, si perspicace, rapide et conséquent comme sauvage, à la merci d'un événement, crise fatale amenée chez mademoiselle de Watteville.” (*Albert Savarus*, 73)

Instead of controlling and limiting her daughter's creativity, Colette brought more flexibility by not interfering with the embroidery that is being executed before her eyes. Bel-Gazou's creativity, which appears meaningless to Colette, represents the drive of energy to negotiate the semiotic boundaries with her mother: that is to say, Bel-Gazou's drive to negotiate the semiotic boundaries with her mother which in turn facilitated the conversation and allowed Bel-Gazou's thoughts to come into language and initiate the topic of the dialogue. “Maman?” asks Bel-Gazou “Il n'y a que quand on est marié qu'un homme peu tenir son bras autour d'une dame?” (155). Bel-Gazou's comment on the subject on men's etiquette towards a woman subverted the adult and the child language register and showed maturity as it presented a new vision of the mother-daughter relationship in the twentieth century by emphasizing communication.

The needle's *thread* and the *thread* of life: breaking the structure in Albert Savarus and “La couseuse”

The plot in *Albert Savarus* and “La couseuse” shared the common metaphor of the needle's *thread* as the *thread of life*. Indeed, the embroiderer pins a yarn on the canvas of the embroidery and can either choose to follow a pattern's guidelines, or to create their own design. Similarly, an individual has agency over the course of his or her destiny and

one can choose the direction that life will take, or else decide to abide by the rules that one has created for them. In the nineteenth century, the art of embroidering was understood to be a moral duty for a woman, instead of a creative pleasure; however, Philomène transgressed this gendered expectation and went beyond the restricted space on the canvas. For example, the narrator described Philomène as a nineteen-year-old girl who lacked worldly knowledge due to the limited choice of literature she could access.¹⁰⁶ Instead, her mother favored domestic work for her daughter: “La baronne apprit à sa fille tous les petits points possible de la tapisserie et les petits ouvrages de femme: la couture, la broderie, le filet” (64). Under their mothers’ supervision, both Philomène de Watteville and Bel-Gazou opted for a choice that went beyond the boundaries established for them and broke away from any structure they were expected to follow in life and on the embroidered canvas. The metaphor of the canvas as a path of life and as a symbol of society’s structure are yet another point of intertextuality in “La couseuse” and *Albert Savarus*. For instance, at the beginning of *Albert Savarus*, Philomène at first worked within the boundaries of her embroidery, but as she grew more independent, rebellious and established plans to sabotage Savarus’ life, her needlework similarly failed to follow the required pattern. In turn, her mother reprimands “Philomène, ma petite, à quoi penses-tu donc, tu va au delà de la raie” (37). Meanwhile, Bel-Gazou embroidered “tout de travers”.

The mothers’ authority supervised the course of the needle’s thread as much as the thread of life. Balzac’s *Albert Savarus* discussed women’s education through the scope of

¹⁰⁶ The physical portrait of Philomène, a nineteen-year-old woman, is depicted as “frêle, plate et de la dernière insignifiance.” See Balzac, 35.

needlework and the narrator stated that during the nineteenth century, “L’éducation des filles comporte des problèmes si graves, car l’avenir d’une nation est dans la mère” (73). Mothers who share the same austere educational practices and morals as La Baronne de Watteville, taught their daughters to ply the needle in a prescribed fashion so that the needle’s thread followed a charted blueprint, in the same ways most nineteenth-century women of various social classes abided by the oppressive road map that patriarchy and hierarchy outlined for them. However, Balzac and Colette framed the topic of needlework in such a way as to suggest larger disruptions of these nineteenth-century traditions regarding domesticity and women’s education. Both authors show that the needle can be a weapon to break inflexibility.

Unlike Philomène’s mother who taught her daughter various techniques of needlework, Colette refused to teach it to Bel-Gazou (415). Indeed, the woman-author only changed her mind after her friends’ peer-pressure: “Votre fille à neuf ans, m’a dit une amie, et elle ne sait pas coudre? Il faut qu’elle apprenne à coudre. Par mauvais temps il vaut mieux, pour une enfant de cette âge, un ouvrage de couture qu’un livre romanesque” (153). What I find interesting in this first paragraph of “La couseuse” is Colette’s emphasis on the mothers’ traditional standards regarding the education of their daughters who sought validation through needlework in order to belong of the society. Unlike other young girls in her age group, Bel-Gazou did not sew, she was marginalized, mocked and even bullied by the mothers of other bourgeois families: “Tu as neuf ans et tu ne sais pas coudre?” (153). Consequently, Colette decided to let her daughter learn needlework, but the tone of the narration in “La couseuse” expressed discomfort regarding this choice (153).

Because Colette opted for reading activities and acknowledged Bel-Gazou's perspicacity in addition to her power for observations and details, I suggest that the mother feared the precocity of these skills, and that as a result, the young girl could cause the same downfall for her and her family as Philomène de Watteville.¹⁰⁷ Most importantly, Colette was afraid that the activity would also change her daughter's innocence as well as her sense of morality like Philomène, who was ultimately transformed morphologically and psychologically. Indeed, the quiet Philomène manipulated friends, imitated Savarus' signature, and schemed against him in what the narrator referred to as "une trame odieuse ...et invisible" (162).¹⁰⁸ The exchange of letters written by Philomène, who replicated Savarus' handwriting, created an invisible framework that Colette called "Le canevas sur lequel elle (Philomène) dessinait la perte et le désespoir d'Albert Savarus" (155).¹⁰⁹ Hence, Philomène, whose voice had been silenced by her mother and the clerics from Besançon, changed her fate by narrating her own story in these letters.¹¹⁰ As a result, the heroine paved her own destiny and subverted society's limitations on unmarried women. Nonetheless, weaving the canvas and subverting authority came with a price in Balzac's tale and ultimately led to her punishment, leaving her mutilated: "elle a perdu un bras et la

¹⁰⁷ The third person narrator warns the reader that Philomène was not a role model to follow and that this story, was a lesson for women whose behavior were like her "Quoique tel caractère soient exceptionnel, il existe malheureusement beaucoup trop de Philomène, et cette histoire convient de leçon qui doit leur servir d'exemple" (Balzac 65)

¹⁰⁸ In his introduction, Smethurst wrote that *Albert Savarus* was certainly one of the most autobiographical novel of *La Comédie Humaine* (Balzac 9).

¹⁰⁹ The canvas Philomène was embroidering while she plot the fall of Savarus. See Balzac 155.

¹¹⁰ Savarus was having an affair with a married Italian princess, Francesca. In the letters, Philomène told Francesca that she married Savarus (Balzac 158).

jambe gauche; son visage porte d'affreuse cicatrice" (*Albert Savarus*, 162;167). In *Albert Savarus*, Balzac maintained various themes from Ovid's Philomela in *Metamorphoses*, such as a woman being silenced by authority, the metaphor of communicating text via textile and embroidering.

CLAUDINE

As I argued in my introduction, Colette did not abide by either "fictional autobiography" and "autobiographical fiction" but rather, used a form of autofiction that escaped the genres and established a writing platform for *Claudine à l'école* and *La vagabonde*. Because of the flexibility offered by autofiction, the author's voice fluctuated between fiction and autobiography. Scholars such as Jean Larnac who published *Colette, sa vie, son oeuvre* in 1927 and later, Paul Hollander who wrote *Colette, ses apprentissages* in 1979, favored an autobiographical approach in their analysis of Colette's work. However, Colette rejected the autobiographical categorization of her work. In 1926, the author signed a copy of *Claudine à l'école* addressed to Frederic Levevre in which she inscribed "Ne prenez pas ce vieux roman pour une autobiographie" (135). In similar fashion to Ovid's Philomela, Colette used textiles to channel a message that rebelled against the enforced silence as a means to lift the taboos on the authenticity of the Claudines' author. While Colette is prisoner of the semiotic, the author is constantly renegotiating the boundaries that separate her from the Symbolic in the Claudines before fully metamorphosing in *La Vagabonde*. We will see how the woman-author distanced herself from the androcentric literary genre, and most importantly, the Claudine image.

(Non) fictional characters: blurring the lines

Although the author of autofiction draws from personal experience to create a story, Colette brought complexity to the genre since she preserved the protagonists' distinctive identities and personas from her own life. Yet, the author alters the pronunciation of the names portrayed by substituting a letter (Flieger, 5). In *La vagabonde*, for instance, George Wague and Léon Hamel, with whom Colette worked on stage, incarnate respectively Brague and Hamond. Similarly, in *Claudine à l'école*, Colette modifies the phonology of the names of Saint-Sauveur's citizens: from Emile Gagneau to Ganneau and Marie Gentilhomme to Marie Belhomme. Other portrayals, like that of Saint-Sauveur's school teacher Olympe Terrain, conveyed a caricature that impacted Terrain's reputation as Mlle Sergent in such ways that the teacher considered leaving her profession (Pichois, 89). Subsequently, Colette intermingles fiction and biographical facts in both works classified as autobiographical fiction but most importantly, she self-fashioned protagonists who belong to both reality and fiction, which leads me to suggest the invention of this matrix, like that of an imaginary canvas on which a weaver embroiders characters, to blur the lines between literary genres.

Roland Barthes: dressing/parole and the semiotic

In this section I will argue that in *Claudine à l'école*, Colette made use of fabric to establish an autobiographical performance that transgressed phallogocentric conceptions of gender and femininity such as bodily constriction, women's abasement and, most importantly, silencing. Clothing is a form of communication and a language that gives voice to the psyche. In *The Language of Fashion*, Roland Barthes defines the word

“dressing” as “the personal mode with which the wearer adopts the dress that is proposed to them by their social group”; in contrast, Barthes defines “dress” as the features and dimensions prescribed by the group as a part of fashion (9).¹¹¹ I compare Barthes’ definition of “dressing” to the action of put on clothes and choice of clothing that fits one’s body. Barthes further makes an analogy between “dressing”, as a form of *parole* (speaking) whereas “dress” coincides with *langue* (language).¹¹² Because speaking is part of language and “dressing” is part of “dress” both are in the same constant interaction and tension as the semiotic and the Symbolic. However, when *parole*/dressing (semiotic) finds its autonomy, it disrupts *langue*/dress (Symbolic). Therefore, I will show how Colette manipulated *parole*/dressing in *Claudine à l’école* -- and by this, I mean the textile inside the text -- to challenge the liminalities. In fact, self-expression, such as the choice of clothing item, the partial absence of items and improvised clothes subverted Willy’s oppressive system and, on a larger scale, the inequalities of *La Belle Epoque*.

Willy, “le père des Claudine”? : controlling Claudine’s image

Claudine à l’école played a pivotal part in establishing Colette’s career as a woman-writer, and for similar reasons, Claudine’s image and that of Colette are interlinked. Following the publication of *Claudine à l’école*, the novel caused many controversies.

¹¹¹ For instance, Barthes takes the example of the “broadness of the shoulders” is part of dressing when it corresponds exactly to the anatomy of the wearer; but in contrast, “broadness of shoulders” is part of dress when its dimension is prescribed by the group as part of a fashion (*The language of fashion*, 9).

¹¹² For instance, *parole*/dressing includes the individual dimensions of the clothing item, the partial absence of items and improvised clothes (*The language of fashion*, 27).

Despite Willy's preface and patronym in the 1900 edition, Parisian critics were skeptical about the author's identity considering the singularity of the literary product. Indeed, there is a gap between Willy's identity as a writer and the content of *Claudine à l'école* (Pichois, 86). Upon the novel's immediate success, which sold more than forty thousand copies within a few months, Willy exploited Claudine's image by marketing the fictional character as a new fashion type. Colette's husband quickly launched a Claudine clothing line with such items as the "Claudine Collar," hat and tie; a Claudine cosmetic line comprised of foundation and other make-up, lotion and perfume and finally, cigarettes, post-cards and photography paper "Claudine" (Ferrier-Caverivière, 18). Following the novel's popularity, Willy, then portrayed as "le père des Claudines," forged a Claudine enterprise and even compelled his wife to incarnate Claudine after convincing her to cut her long hair to resemble Polaire, who played the theatrical adaptation of *Claudine à l'école*. Hence, who truly fashioned the Claudine type? Because clothing conveyed a phallogocentric and fetishistic control over the Claudine image, Colette manipulated fabric to destabilize the dress code Willy imposed.

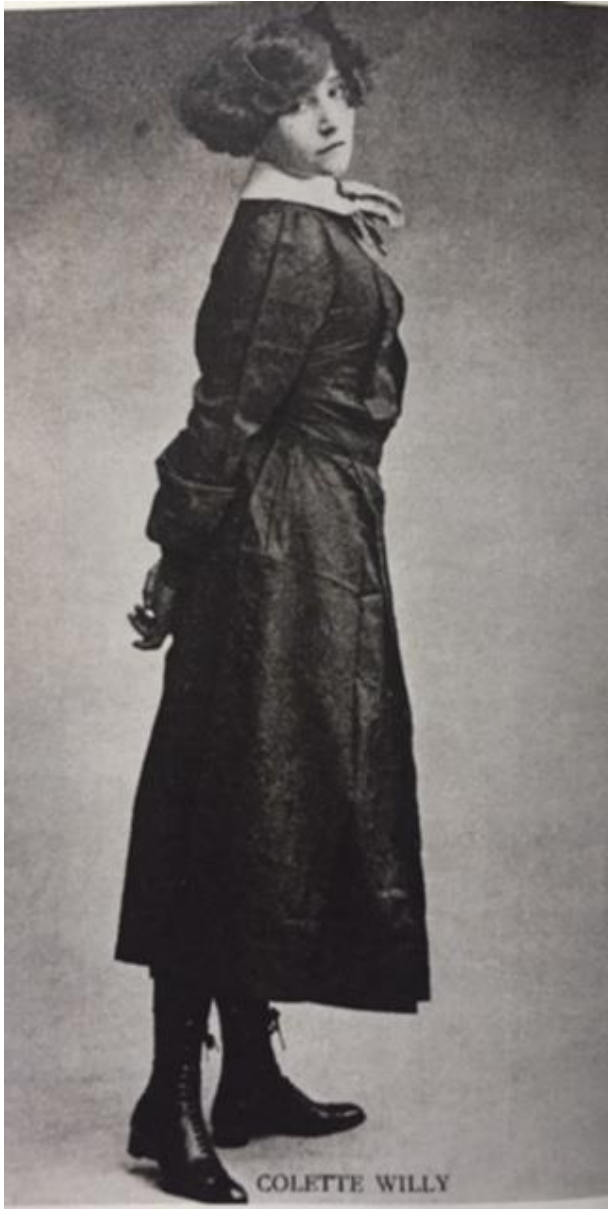


Illustration 15 : Colette wearing the Claudine school uniform. Carte Postale Imaginée par Willy (1904) with the famous “col Claudine,” neckerchief and black smock (Album Colette, 109)

“J’inaugure les robes ouvertes” : disrupting the symbolic

During the *Claudine à l’école* époque, Colette had already subverted the conventional dress codes. Despite the influence of “la mode parisienne,” Colette stayed true to her origins in La Puisaye region following her marriage to Willy and as a result, she fostered a clothing style that focuses on harmony, mobility and convenience (Ferrier-Caverivière, 15). Similarly, Claudine brought the attention to her clothes to defetishize the formal school uniform. Using Roland Barthes’s theory, I argue that the act of “getting dressed” destabilizes dress/*langue* (Symbolic) when an individual does not actualize on their body the general inscription imposed by an institution or a figure of authority (8). In this case, the act of getting dressed (dressing/*parole*) is considered an individual act that subverts the norms.

Because dressing represents a form of self-expression, then the choice of clothing in *Claudine à l’école* illustrates the importance of giving a voice to fabric in her work. For example, during a period of hot and humid weather, Claudine declared that “...maintenant, on montre de la peau. J’inaugure des robes ouvertes en carré; quelquechose de moyenâgeux, avec des manches qui s’arrêtent au coude...et pour le cou, je ne crains personne” (140). Fifteen-year-old Claudine plays with fabric to express her discontent about the constraints of the dress code imposed by the school institution and authority. According to Kathryn Sullivan, the text of textiles’ function in any story tells us about a very important form of communication heretofore ignored by society (12). In similar fashion to Philomela, Claudine’s textile in text represents a revolution that conveys a semiotic drive into the symbolic arena (136).

I argue that in this passage the author rebelled against Willy's control of the Claudine image and communicated metaphorically her oppression as well as her attempt to regain authorial agency by breaking into the symbolic. First, the open dress establishes a visible gap between body and fabric. In fact, the syntax of this passage divides "peau" and "robes ouvertes" into two sentences. In addition, the body is named prior to the clothing, making it seem as though the skin protrudes the fabric in such ways that the feminine body breaks the suffocating fabric. Following Kathryn Sullivan's explanation, this fragmentation shows the author's semiotic driving energy to break the thetic (the constricting school clothes) in order to enter the Symbolic. Secondly, on a grammatical level, Claudine innovates a dressing style that counterattacks the "Col Claudine" that Willy imposed on his wife and Polaire. Indeed, Claudine declares "J'inaugure les robes ouvertes en carré," but the word "carré" does not function as an adjective; instead, it is an adverbial phrase of manner that depicts the type of dress described. This open dress "en carré," Claudine explains, is a medieval style, like that of a castle chatelain, that is squared and opened in the front and shows the feminine cleavage as well as the neck "pour le cou, je ne crains personne" (140). The shape of the open dress shows cleavage that opposes the same round "col Claudine" that covered the chest and infantilized both Claudine and Colette. Hence, this defetishized open collar demonstrates that the woman-author uses textile as a silent message to inscribe her own version of the fetish and as a result, Colette challenged and transgressed the normative system such as the mandatory school uniforms as well as Willy's controlling authority over Claudine's authorial rights.

Barthes further explains that the act of dressing becomes a fashion statement when dressing constitutes the norms of a particular group. After launching the trend at school, Claudine notices that her classmates quickly mimicked her style (140). For instance, each schoolgirl began to expose a part of her body and replicated Claudine's performance during recess: one showed her shoulders while others exposed their cleavage. Unlike her classmates who wore stockings to comply to the school dress code, Claudine wore socks that exposed her bare legs under her dress (140). On the one hand, Claudine's decision to dress down and to expose her skin illustrates her preference for comfort over constraint and her unwillingness to actualize on her body the general inscription imposed by an institution or authority. On the other hand, opening the dress is undoing textile the same way Colette was undoing the text she was forced to write under the male authority of Willy's factory. Therefore, exposing skin encapsulates a message that conveys a counter-narrative to Willy's authority and infantilization of the Claudine character. Willy reclaims his authority in the *Claudine à l'école* play by praising Polaire as the inventor of the socks' trend. In fact, in 1905, Willy published *Chaussettes pour Dames: défense et illustration du mollet féminin* in which he emphasized "Je m'associe humblement à sa gloire et je revendique ma part dans cette révolution au petit pied" (112).

Claudine, a toxic extra layer

Ten years after the first publication of *Claudine à l'école*, the heroine of *La vagabonde*, Renée Néré, contends with stripping away Claudine's image that bonds, figuratively, to the woman-author's identity like that of a toxic second skin. Claudine

conveys a paradox: besides embodying the powerful innovative “type” that launched Colette’s literary career, Claudine’s image conveys a destructive success that will ultimately haunt the woman-author throughout her career. In *Mes apprentissages*, Colette reveals the reaction of Catulle Mendès following the publication of the *Claudine* series: “Vous verrez ce que c’est d’avoir, en littérature, créer un type. Vous ne vous rendez pas compte. une force, certainement ... Mais aussi une sorte de chatiment, une faute qui vous colle à la peau, une récompense insupportable ... Vous n’y échapperez pas” (32). According to Mendès, Claudine, as a literary character, represented a curse and a mistake that “colle à la peau” of its creator. Like a mask that Colette cannot undo, I will show how the image of “la conseillère fardée” haunts the first person narrator at the beginning of *La vagabonde*, most precisely when the narrator looks at her reflection in the mirror, as well as in 1908 in “le miroir” published in *Les vrilles de la vigne* prior to *La vagabonde*. Both novels illustrate Kristeva’s definition of *thetic* that functions like a semi-permeable membrane and filter that is constantly reorganized by semiotic energy that pulses through it as it negotiates the semiotic and the semiotic realms, that is to say the time during which the author is in the process of finding her own autonomy (Sullivan *Weaving the Word* 37).

***LA VAGABONDE* : RIPPING FABRIC, ENTERING THE SYMBOLIC**

Undoing the Claudine fabric, embroidering a new canvas

In her 1908 fictional autobiography *Les vrilles de la vigne*, which precedes *La vagabonde* of 1910, Colette already asserts her weariness regarding Claudine, with whom she no longer wishes to be identified. The chapter entitled “Le miroir” presents *une*

fictionalization de soi that engages a dialogue between the author-narrator Colette, and Claudine:

Il m'arrive souvent de rencontrer Claudine. Où? Vous n'en saurez rien. Aux heures troubles du crépuscule ...je rencontre Claudine...

Aujourd'hui, c'est dans la demi-obscurité d'une chambre sombre ...

Claudine sourit et s'écrie: « Bonjour, mon Sosie! » Mais je secoue la tête et je réponds: « Je ne suis pas votre Sosie. N'avez-vous point assez de ce malentendu qui nous accole l'une à l'autre, qui nous reflète l'une dans l'autre, qui nous masque l'une par l'autre? Vous êtes Claudine, et je suis Colette. Nos visages, jumeaux, ont joué à cache-cache assez longtemps. [...] on vous a mariée à Willy [...] Tout cela finit par lasser, ne trouvez-vous pas? (*Les vrilles de la vigne*, 1030)

The narrator depicts Claudine as a chimerical character who manifests at dusk -- “crépuscule,” “heures troubles,” “demi-obscurité” – and whose spirit returns to trouble the writer’s mind. In other words, Claudine belongs to a half-world on the threshold of both reality and fiction. Most importantly, Colette asserts her identity as a woman-author whose maturity dominates the conversation and challenges young Claudine as a means to firmly dissociate their identities: “Vous êtes Claudine et je suis Colette.” In fact, unlike Colette and Renée Néré in *La vagabonde*, Claudine “n’aime pas le music-hall” and *la pantomime* (*Les vrilles de la vigne*, 1030). Hence, Colette breaks away from her past: she not only denies any resemblance to Claudine’s personality and identity, but she also discredits her marriage to Willy. Eventually, Claudine’s voice retreats and disappears: “la pensée de mon cher Sosie a rejoint ma pensée, qu’elle épouse avec passion, en silence” (87). The chapter

“Le miroir” played a pivotal role in establishing an independent authorial voice and shaping the next narrator-protagonist, Renée Néré.

The mirror as the imaginary canvas: connecting texts through textile

The hard-fought battle of voices between Colette and Claudine shows similarity with the tensions that Renée Néré experiences in front of the anonymous “conseillère” in *La vagabonde* who questions the identity of the reflection in the mirror: “...devant la glace où nous nous mesurons la conseillère maquillée et moi ...en adversaires dignes l’une de l’autre” (74). In similar fashion to Claudine, “la conseillère” haunts and disturbs the narrator’s story as she strives to maintain control of her discourse during those confrontations: “tu n’as pas de pire ennemi que toi-même! Ne chante pas que tu es mortes inhabitée, légère: la bête que tu oublies hiberne, et se fortifie d’un long sommeil” (117). In her theory of Colette’s ghostwriting, Jerry Aline Flieger claims that the need to recall one’s ghosts is a way of assuring one’s own identity and that during the mirror stage, the subject’s ego is created as a reflection of the internalized image of other beings (173,176). Colette cannot completely separate herself from Claudine and these uncanny returns of the repressed character in *La vagabonde* act as a point of reference from which the author departs in asserting her own identity as an independent writer.

The “mirror” chapter not only put forth a confrontation between Colette and her alter ego Claudine, but also suggested an intertextual link with the opening pages of *La vagabonde*, in which Renée came face to face with “la conseillère masquée ... de l’autre côté du miroir” (60). As a result, both textual fragments convey a dialogue that connects

the images of Claudine, Colette and Renée Néré through *une mise en abîme* that sets the reader between two mirrors in order to expose the transcendental characteristics of the author's identity. From *Les vrilles de la vigne*'s chapter "Le miroir" to *La vagabonde*, Colette created a recursive image that depicted the tensions between the identity of the author, narrator and protagonist, which are intentionally displaced in fictional autobiography as well as the autobiographical fiction. Nonetheless, the *Claudine* exposed fragments of a life Colette wished to have had. According to Brigitte Jandey, Colette interlinked three protocols that unified the autobiographical pact and the fictional pact in order to deceive the reader regarding the veracity of biographical facts: "le protocole nominal des trois identités," "le protocole fictionnel" and finally, "le protocole de référencialité" (146). Deceit takes place on that imaginary canvas I refer to. In *Claudine à l'école*, for instance, Colette weaves fictional fantasy into biographical facts as a means to idealize the lost paradise of her childhood in Saint-Sauveur, whereas *La vagabonde* exposes the life of the mime, Renée Néré, which Colette experienced in Paris as she penned the novel.

Ripping sheer fabric, revealing taboos: a metamorphose

In *Mes apprentissages*, Colette reveals the reaction of Catulle Mendès following the publication of the *Claudine* series: "Vous verrez ce que c'est d'avoir, en littérature, créer un type. Vous ne vous rendez pas compte. une force, certainement Mais aussi une sorte de chatiment, une faute qui vous colle a la peau, une récompense insupportable ... Vous n'y échapperez pas" (32). I compare Mendès's metaphor of Claudine as a type and a curse to Colette in the opening scene of *La vagabonde*, during which the first-person

narrator looks at her own reflection in the mirror and questions the identity of “la conseillère maquillée,” “fardée,” and “masquée de rouge mauve ... qui m’épie de l’autre côté du miroir” (59-61). In an attempt to recognize her identity concealed behind *la conseillère*’s make-up, the narrator engages in an internal dialogue with the masked “Other,” who questions in turn “Est-ce bien moi qui est là?” (59). This doubling of identity between moi and “la conseillère fardée” illustrates an identity crisis as well as a desire of separation between the self and the haunting image of the fictional “Other.” In an ascending gradation, the longer the narrator stared at the mirror, the thicker the layer of make-up weighed on her skin. In fact, the Other in the mirror, who is first introduced as “maquillée,” is quickly described as “frottée d’une pâte grasse,” then “fardée” and ultimately, “masquée.” In an analogy to Mendès’ metaphor, the Claudine “type” and that of “la conseillère masquée” both convey an undesired layer that “colle à la peau.” In similar fashion to a toxic layer, like a Claudine and “la conseillère fardée” paralyzes and control Colette’s capacity of exteriorizing her authentic identity as a woman-writer.

Renée, the narrator of *La vagabonde*, is on a quest to escape the mask that oppresses her body, mind and creativity. Indeed, Renée identifies herself as “une femme de lettres qui a mal tournée ... qui n’écrit plus” (69). In similar fashion to Colette, Renée’s life took a different path and destiny after her divorce. The former author now belongs to *le demi-monde* and her new vocation consists in entertaining the clients of a Parisian music-hall (69). To Renée, dance and performance on stage convey a silent, yet powerful narration that paves the way to a liberated body. It is an alternative to the joy she finds as a woman-writer. As the time of Renée’s performance approaches, the narrator’s skin slowly frees

itself from the suffocating artificial layer that sticks to her: first, the “bleu gras” around her eyes “commence à fondre,” and when she rubs her hands together, “le blanc liquide se craquelle” (61). The moment the layer of make-up begins to fade, the mime’s bare skin is unveiled and the narrator reconnects with her identity before entering the stage. In fact, she takes an ultimate look in the mirror and recognizes her image, “C’est pourtant bien moi qui suis là” (60). Once on stage, the mask is lifted, Renée’s skin finally breathes and she declares “je me sens soulagée, engrenée, devenue légère et irresponsable” (60). The moving body prompts a sensation of liberation and invincibility in front of the audience. This moment also captures the playful and carefree side of a woman whose manners are intentionally “out of line” only to slip outside of one’s control and music-hall protocol.

Renée’s feeling of bold irresponsibility challenges deliberately the repressive etiquette of socially constructed behaviors, and as a result, she rebels against the constricting fashion trends imposed onto women’s bodies during *La belle époque*. During Renée’s next performance on stage, in which she incarnates Salomé, the mime transgresses the dress codes as a means to find freedom of speech through movement. Before she appears in front of a sold-out private venue, the dancer describes her costume as simply made of “le voile qui constitue presque tout mon costume ... et qui mesure mètres de tour” (*La vagabonde*, 100). Hence, the weightless adornments and the diaphanous fabric embrace the feminine body in ways that facilitate the dancer to sway freely on stage. By the same token, the flexibility of her body condemns any type of constraint, like the corset or the cumbersome and crippling hat which she describes as “l’obligatoire bonnet de cheveux ... noué d’un large bandeau de ruban ou de métal” that hinders the features and

the identity of the women sitting in the audience. In contrast, Renée “se penche, versant un flot de cheveux parfumé” and channels her autonomy (102). Colette’s emphasis on the fluidity of movement voices a narrative of liberation while on stage. Renée’s feminine curves are in full motion while she inscribes the stage with a loud message that delivers freedom of mind, body and soul. As a mime, her silent authority breaks through the crowd’s nattering “enragés bavardages” and promptly silence it.

The scene climaxes into a burlesque yet sensual strip-tease: Renée “demi-nue sur l’estrade” further discloses that “le voile se desserré ... me révélant aux yeux de ceux qui sont là” (104). It is further stated that during the mime performance, Renée bares one breast while the other remains covered (106). By choosing and tearing the sheer fabric that shields the intimate modesty of femininity, the narrator not only exposes a part of the woman’s body that persists as a taboo topic among society, but she also challenges a patriarchal controlled fashion industry that oppresses the feminine with constricting artificial garments.¹¹³

***La vagabonde* and *La Chair*: between reality and fiction.**

Renée’s mime performance as Salomé “demi-nue sur l’estrade” is a pivotal point in the first part of the novel, because the first-person narrator exposes the true feminine nature of a “moi,” that is liberated from any constructed images that have previously been imposed on her body, particularly that of Claudine who “colle à la peau” throughout the

¹¹³ Artificial garment. She voiced her disapproval for those garments pictured in magazines, See Pichois, 155-156.

first decade of the twentieth century. It is inevitable for the upper-bourgeois readers, critics and audience of *La Belle Epoque* to associate the vision portrayed in Renée's performance in *La vagabonde* with that of Colette in *La Chair* from 1907 to 1911 (Pichois, 569-570).¹¹⁴ With more than three hundred representations in Paris and major French cities, *La Chair* also owed its immediate success to the specific moment in which Colette's dress is torn and her breast is exposed; this moment becomes an iconic on-stage signature of the work (161).¹¹⁵ Despite the mime's demonstration of physical strength, balance, and agility, contemporary reviews proliferate to abase the feminine body's abilities. For example, in the satirical magazine *Le Courrier Français* of January 1911, Paul Marguerite published an article on *La Chair* in which he depicts "le jeu libre du corps" of Colette's body flow and further characterized this freedom of movement as "hystériques torsions." The adjective's negative connotation clearly associates Colette's mime performance to the mental disorder of hysteria that stigmatized women during this period.

Hence, Colette and Renée both let the flesh of the feminine body rip through the fabric of her costume at the music-hall and therefore voices, "à coeur ouvert," an authentic *fabrique de soi*. Most importantly, Colette-Renée follows her instinct in the self-fashioning of a new identity as a woman-author in *La vagabonde*. The photograph depicting Colette-Renée (Illustration 16) contrasts with that of the Colette-Claudine's who, in 1901, appears fully clothed and almost choked by the infamous "Claudine collar" that Willy fabricates

¹¹⁴ She wrote to Robert de Montesquieu "J'ai inventé pour moi une jolie danse très lente. S'il vous plaisait de voir danser un ex-faune au beaux muscles, je serais heureuse de me mettre a votre disposition" (Pichois, 153).

¹¹⁵ Except in cities such as Nice, and the Alpes-Maritime region prohibit nudity

and replicates on his post-card collection (Illustration 15). Ironically, Willy categorically refused to let Colette perform on stage during their marriage (Pichois, 158). Therefore, *La Chair* gave Colette an opportunity to plot her revenge in the spotlight after living in Willy's shadow for ten years. In fact, Colette was silenced about the Claudine series, neglected and left alone by Willy who had many mistresses.¹¹⁶ Most importantly, Colette was often objectified and marketed to promote Willy's reputation as portrayed on the pictures. In turn, Colette used the popularity of her ex-husband's patronym to publicize and to promote more than 300 theatrical representations until 1923.

¹¹⁶ During their divorce, Willy ordered the destruction of all the Claudine manuscripts, but *Claudine en ménage* and *Claudine s'en va* were saved. See Viel, 69.



Illustration 16 : Colette and Wague in *La Chair* (1911). (Dormann, 155)

The portrayal of a mime in the novel *La vagabonde*, and in real life in *La Chair* are a clear statement of independence from patriarchal subjugation for the woman-writer-artist. Despite a bitter divorce and a legal battle over the Claudine series, Colette continued to sign her works and to perform on stage as “Colette Willy” until 1923. Indeed, from 1907 to 1911, the name “Colette Willy” is printed, duplicated and publicized on advertising posters and programs for all representations of *La Chair*. Performing on stage and half nude transgress any ethics, dress codes, and constraints that Willy previously imposed on Colette during their marriage. Most importantly, the popularity of *La Chair* echoed beyond

Paris since the theater company toured in thirty-two French cities in thirty-two days, creating therefore more opportunities for Colette to expand her network as a means to self-fashion a new image. For example, in Geneva, the Apollo-Theater poster of June 1911 presents the name “Colette Willy” in a bold font size script that dominates the space of the announcement and consequently conveys agency.

Furthermore, the theater reserved a special place on the poster as a means to highlight (in bold here) the event’s details and to warn the audience about the performance’s audacity:

Nous sommes heureux d’abriter deux célébrités théâtrales telles que **Georges Wague**, le mime incomparable et **Colette Willy**, l’instigatrice des **Claudine**, l’auteur de tant d’oeuvres retentissantes et notamment **La Vagabonde**, dont le succès fut énorme cet hiver. Nous nous faisons un devoir cependant de dire à notre public habituel: ce spectacle n’est pas notre spectacle ordinaire et tous ceux auxquels un frisson **d’art véritable** ne saurait faire oublier **quelques situations osées sont priés de s’abstenir**. (Dormann, 156)

By describing the performance as “quelques situations osées,” this framed section on the poster addresses the audience with a euphemism the same way Renée in *La vagabonde* and Colette on stage both veil the majority of the feminine body in order to attenuate the spectator’s vision. As a result, the mime’s “situations osées” not only excite the spectator’s curiosity, but also entail a mystery that defies banality.

Although the script promoted the event, it also serves as a medium to market Colette’s novels. As a result, Colette crystalized her image as a performer and as

independent woman-writer. Besides posters, theater companies distributed programs that summarized the plot of the performances. With regard to *La Chair*, a part of the program revealed the plot's climax: "...il la tuerait peut-être si, dans la lutte, son vêtement se déchirant, ne laisse apparaître 'La Chair' dont il est sauvagement épris" (Pichois, 155). *La Chair* and *La vagabonde* share similarities in the performance of the body on stage and the performance on the page within the 'body of writing,' and by this I mean textual narration, which both convey an intertextuality. In *La vagabonde*, for instance, the (autobiographical) body of the woman author tears, metaphorically, into the narrative fabric. The identity of the narrating "I" is, in the first-person narrator, the protagonist, as well as the autobiographical reflection of the author's own life experiences. To put it another way, Colette exposes a part of her life experience, but she also leaves a majority of true events concealed behind a veiled fabric. Similarly, in *La Chair*, the sheer fabric is ripped to expose Colette's left breast. Therefore, the woman-author-artist self-fashions *une fabrique de soi* on stage and on the page in ways that the narrative "I" is not bound to one genre, but rather to a multi-dimensional framework that goes beyond the literary traditions of writing the self.

What is revealed and concealed about the author fragments the feminine body as well as the body of writing. For example, in a photograph of Colette performing in *La Chair*, instead of covering the entirety of the skin as we commonly see in public and on stage, clothing breaks the continuity of the flesh that is exposed to the audience in the same ways that fiction disrupts to be interwoven with the autobiographical narrative and vice

versa.¹¹⁷ Nancy K. Miller states that the truth of woman writer's life lies in the *intratext* of her work, in other words, *within* the body of her writing (*Writing Fiction: Women's Autobiography in France*, 61). I consider the passage when Renée enters the stage to perform "à demi-nue" as a fragment that illustrates Miller's argument.¹¹⁸ Therefore Colette uses Renée's mime performance as an *intratext* within the novel to justify, explain and voice in writing what her silent mime performance on stage meant in real life, particularly regarding her choice of clothing.

Colette gives voice to clothing through the partial absence of fabric on the stage and on the page. The mime's performance in *la vagabonde* voices in writing what her performance on stage and choice of clothing meant in real life in *La Chair*. Colette's *mise-à-nue* of the female body confirms that by 1910, Colette-Claudine had outgrown her school dress. What Colette wrote in her notebooks, she performed on stage a decade later. As she confirmed "j'inaugure les robes ouvertes" was the fashion statement of a modern woman of la Belle Epoque that would ultimately emancipate to find her own freedom in life and to establish a career as a respected author. Most importantly Colette's embroidery is a matrix of meanings drawn out across her publications from 1900 *Claudine* to 1944 *Broderie ancienne*. It is an ever-changing design that narrates her own story as a young woman who was victim of a literary rape and who ultimately plotted her revenge in stitches to regain a position of authority.

¹¹⁷ Colette refused to wear the required bodysuit because it made the body look asexual. See Pichois 156.

¹¹⁸ The scene in which the narrator describes her mime performance such as "le voile se déserre ...me révélant aux yeux de ceux qui sont là" consists of a fragment. See *La vagabonde* 106.

Conclusion

The autobiographies of Sand, Bernhardt and Colette represent a courageous breakthrough for female authors. Reading them brought me to question their choice of form and content as well as the boundaries between the private and the public with which these women struggled. I found that these women writers to a large extent integrated the feminine traditions of *les travaux d'aiguille* into a literary genre previously dominated by men. Because crafting and needlework have been labeled as feminine skills -- a form of women's expression across civilizations -- it was natural for these women to build on such craft in the telling of their life stories. Through my research, I demonstrated that Sand, Bernhardt and Colette each contribute to stronger female voices in literature by the style of their autobiographies which I proposed to examine from a perspective of needlework. From patchwork quilt, to weaving and embroidering, I have come to conclude that each woman-author reflects on her existence and presents a way of writing the self in ways that share striking similarities and differences.

First, Sand's *Histoire de ma vie* is like a patchwork quilt, a fragmented work that displaces the narrative "I." From gathering, cutting, and reassembling fragments of family correspondence for instance, to imitating her father's signature, George Sand acquires the authority of a patronym that she, alone, established. Her legacy will prosper through the next generations of her family lineage (Maurice and Solange Sand). She opened the door to women to proclaim their identity as separate from men. Next, Sarah Bernhardt's *Ma double vie* is a form of woven drapery that not only provides a protective structure to her true identity, but also inscribes a fictional mobile identity in life and in society. Because

“text is *tissue*,” figuratively, Bernhardt not only wove a memoir that blurs the line between reality and fiction, but she also used visual arts such as photographs, and later lithographs as a medium to self-promote her career. Finally, Colette embroiders progressively across her career. Each work I selected is connected to one another through the theme of embroidery. She created an imaginary canvas, a *matrix of meanings(s)* on which she embroidered her story in order to communicate Willy’s oppressions as well as how she regained authority.

These women-authors found a voice of their own by gathering and combining various skills required for needlework, pantomime, sculpting, and acting. They were proficient in multi-disciplines that they not only learned to develop since their childhood, such as the leisure and passion for crafting that Sand and Colette shared with their mother, but also those they explored later in life outside of the literary environment. This *métissage* of skills transpires in their autobiography and teach the reader how Sand, Bernhardt and Colette each became *fille de ses oeuvres*. Drawing from the metaphor of text and textiles, I showed that needlework or “mes tissages” (my weavings) is the best description for the ways in which Sand, Bernhardt and Colette weave the word to design a customized autobiographical text influenced by women’s traditions. Each woman-author made use of the threads that were handed to her from various sources—and by threads I mean skills, ideas, knowledge, and practices—to interweave these threads using a form of *bricolage* as a means to self-fashion a new entity that disrupts the traditions of the male canon and the egotistic autobiographical “moi” exemplified by Rousseau, who writes “Moi, moi seul,” or

Stendhal who declares “ De *je* mis avec *moi* tu fais la récidive” and who in other words, created themselves (Lejeune, 19).

However, I confirm that there exists a pattern in each autobiography indicating a desire to be accepted into the male tradition. In fact, all three women-writers reject the feminine traditions of needlework in their text but not outside the text. For instance, Sand was sewing on a daily basis as she penned *Histoire de ma vie*, but the autobiography itself downplays the value of such feminine traditions. Similarly, Colette Willy’s fictional character Claudine refuses to embroider in *Claudine à l’école* as much as the author herself, but once her authorial identity is established as Colette, the theme of embroidery is recuperated later in life as I demonstrated in *La maison de Claudine*, and ultimately becomes the title of one of her latest publication *Broderie ancienne*. As well, Sarah Bernhardt reveals in one short sentence, “J’adorais broder, faire des mignonettes et de la tapisserie,” and while she channeled a panoply of dresses or costumes, which she personally designed with fashion stylists on many occasions: performances, public appearances, and lithographs during her collaboration with Mucha for her plays at Le Théâtre de la Renaissance (*Ma double vie*, 174). Yet, this detail is omitted from *Ma double vie*. In a profession that did not give women access to independence and financial freedom, and because needlework was undervalued and a form of subculture, I conclude that it was the women-authors’ intention to omit the overt theme of needlework, while nevertheless incorporating its technique through their writing style and autobiographical structure.

Textiles are prominent in these feminine texts, and a fundamental element to create a new type of character that marked a pivotal point in the success of these women-authors’

careers. Sand first struggled with the form and content of both *Jeanne* and *Histoire de ma vie*, but as she searched for hybridity between “le nu antique” and “les draperies modernes,” that is to say between the peasant and the modern woman, she created a new type of female protagonist in her rustic novel *Jeanne*, which also paved the way to shape a new type of first person author-narrator and an autobiographical voice that distanced itself from her previous work. Similarly, Bernhardt made use of textiles (clothing) as a structure to propel her public image. Because “text means *tissue*” and that text is produced in a perpetual interweaving according to Barthes, I proposed that textiles provided Bernhardt with a structure that helped reinvent many types of character (64). Catulle Mendès foreshadowed Colette’s success through the fictional protagonist Claudine that he defined as a powerful literary type. In similar fashion to Bernhardt, Claudine’s school uniform shaped the identity of the character inside and outside the text, using visual arts as a medium for publicity.

Sand, Bernhardt and Colette understood the power of intermediality to manipulate their public image, control their career and maneuver through a society that did not give voice to women. In their autobiographies, they self-fashioned *une fabrique de soi* through a performance in which the first person “I” is not bound to one genre, but rather, belongs to a multi-dimensional framework that goes beyond the literary traditions of writing the self. While Nancy K. Miller says that “The truth about women-writers’ lies in the *intratext* of their work,” I also propose that one must investigate these women’s life stories not only in the intertextuality of their work, as I examined Colette’s *Claudine à l’école*, *La maison de Claudine*, *Mes apprentissages* and *Broderie ancienne*, but also in the various medium of communication they engage in. Bernhardt’s and Colette’s identities were *avant-garde*

and also suitable for modern day networking and marketing. This method of inventing the self not only transgressed the male canon but also helped these women-authors find mobility and emancipation. Indeed, Bernhardt, as an actress, and Colette, as a mime both traveled internationally to perform, which later encouraged them to write these experiences in *Ma double vie* and in *La vagabonde*. Similarly, Sand's numerous voyages to Spain, Italy and Paris were sources of inspiration for her novels and autobiography. This mobility created new opportunities to self-promote an image, to more financial independence, and to encounter elitist intellectuals from different circles, but most importantly to be an influencer to the next generation of women-authors, actress and artists.

Sand, Bernhardt and Colette were inclined to reinvent themselves in order to transgress the norms, to regain a position of authority, and to establish a new patronym. Their autobiography deviates from the male model by interweaving feminine traditions. Moving forward, it is worth examining how their lives, skills and passions may have influenced the next generations of French women-authors' work, such as Simone de Beauvoir's *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, or Marguerite Duras' *La douleur* and *L'amant*, to see if they share similarities with the texts I introduced and if the trope of needlework and textile persist to redefine women's autobiographical genre.

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