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Patricia A. Tilburg, *Colette's Republic: Work, Gender, and Popular Culture in France, 1870-1914*. New York: Berghen Books, 2009; 2010. xiv + 231 pp. \$29.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-84545-789-1.

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In *Colette's Republic: Work, Gender, and Popular Culture in France, 1870-1914*, Patricia Tilburg assesses the meaning of secularization by way of a cultural history of French republicanism during the Belle Époque, focusing on the link between *morale laïque* and popular culture of the time. Her work attempts to combine the analyses and insights of cultural history with a study of the politics of the institutions of the Third Republic, specifically the republican school. As Tilburg notes in her introduction, the political history of republicanism tends to concentrate on official culture—schools, manuals and teachers—while cultural analyses of the same period mostly focus on the avant-garde and modernism, often with little attention paid to political issues.[1] Tilburg's aim is to combine these two types of analysis, using the iconic writer Colette (Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette, 1873-1954) as a point of entry.

While much studied by literary scholars, Colette has been relatively neglected by historians. Furthermore, Colette has been viewed as an exceptional individual and categorized as a bohemian who sought to escape from the constraints of bourgeois culture. Yet Colette ended her life as a national icon (like Sarah Bernhardt before her), earning a *Légion d'Honneur*, a seat at the Académie Goncourt, over which she presided, and a state funeral. Was she then as much an insider as an outsider? The answer is a resounding yes. As Tilburg points out, Colette attended secular public school and was thus part of the “first generation of girls formed by the laic instructional revolution of the 1870s” (p. 3). This schooling surely had an impact on her life and career.

The republican school, while maintaining a gendered view of citizenship, also “opened up a conflicted intellectual space in which women such as Colette could forge reasonable identities as public, productive, and creative individuals” (p. 6). Like Philip Nord and Katherine Auspitz, Tilburg illustrates that republican culture, despite its exclusion of women, itself contained the rhetoric that would allow women's emancipation (p. 10).[2] Thus, a methodology, which might at first glance appear disconnected—given the seeming disparity of the topics—is entirely warranted. Tilburg succeeds admirably in uniting the two types of analysis and in keeping her discussion both of Colette and of republican culture linked throughout. The result is a fresh look at French republican culture, particularly its impact on women, as well as a new perspective on Colette herself.

The book is divided into six chapters, an introduction, and an epilogue. The first two chapters deal with republican education for girls, with the first chapter treating work, class, and secular girls' education, and the second, physical and moral education in the Third Republic. These chapters set up the discussions of the four later chapters, which cover diverse aspects of Colette's life and career.

While the republican celebration of work was not a novelty in itself, the particular emphasis on work for the definition of personal and national identities during the Third Republic was. In chapter one, Tilburg examines the ideal of work, especially as it was presented in the school manuals of the period. Some of these manuals were intended for children of both genders while others were specifically written for girls. Although there was a highly gendered discourse in most of these publications, the emphasis on work—especially the value of craft labor—in all of them, represented both as a moral good and as the means of success in the new meritocratic republic, complicated traditional gender notions, which relegated women to the private sphere of the home.

While the working-class girls who frequented the communal school attended by Colette in her native village of Saint-Sauveur-en-Puisaye in Burgundy certainly would be expected to work during their lives, the impact on a more well-to-do girl from the bourgeoisie like Colette was less obvious (Colette's father, it should be said, was a republican council member and a firm supporter of the republican school for girls). Tilburg concludes that this ideal of work shaped Colette's life and career, both as an author and as a music-hall performer, as did the republicans' emphasis on a physical culture which idealized "*une âme saine dans un corps sain.*" Tilburg categorizes this discourse on physical strength and imaginative vibrancy as "gender neutral" (p. 47), noting that during the first ten years of the Republic, the girls' physical curriculum was in theory the same as that of boys (with the exception of the drills associated with the *bataillons scolaires*). This discourse provides a fascinating counterpoint to the pathologization of women's bodies at this time by doctors and in popular culture (as Tilburg herself notes on p. 68) and bit more unpacking of this contradiction would have been useful.

In the second half of the book, Tilburg sets out to illustrate how these ideals marked Colette's life and career, beginning with her entry onto the literary scene in 1900 with the publication of the first of her *Claudine* novels and her marriage (in 1896) to music critic, Willy (Henry Gauthier-Villars, who signed his own name to her *Claudine* novels). The *Claudine* novels became a huge popular success and Claudine herself served as role model for a generation of young girls, a fact recalled by actress Musidora years later. These novels, as Tilburg illustrates so well, directly reflect the influence of the lessons of the republican schools, not only by presenting characters and dialogue straight from their world, but also in their dismantling of the ideals of republican womanhood. Thus, in her novels, as in her roles as a music-hall artist and pantomime performer—the subjects of the last three chapters— Colette simultaneously celebrated republican ideals even as she undercut them.

Music-hall artists and pantomimes have generally been represented as bohemian outcasts seeking to escape the ordered world of the bourgeoisie. Indeed, Colette, with her scandalous performances (appearing in the nude) and numerous lovers (among them, women), in some ways exemplifies this model. She was a New Woman (but not necessarily a feminist) who flaunted societal norms of the good wife and mother. Yet at the same time, Colette's view of herself and her work were profoundly shaped by her belief in the republican ideals of discipline, work, thrift and commitment to her craft. As Tilburg writes: "For Colette, the labor of the music-hall profession was far more meaningful than its performative elements, a distinction that has been lost in evocations of Colette as an offbeat belle-époque entertainer. Her sustained attention to labor, thrift and domestic orderliness throughout her life and work demonstrates both her discomfort with the transgression of social norms she was attempting and the forceful mental framework that organized that discomfort." (pp. 102-103). Tilburg further argues that Colette believed that the frank appraisal of sex and sexuality in her novels was an affirmation of the physical culture praised in republican school manuals—although republican leaders of the time surely would have disagreed!

While building on the work of such scholars as Mary Louise Roberts, Lenard Berlanstein, Jerrold Siegel, and Deborah Silverman (her dissertation advisor), Tilburg makes her own significant contribution to the field by combining a study of Colette's life and career with an analysis of the political culture of republicanism. Her sources are varied and the style is highly readable.[3] The result is a lively and rich portrait of Belle-Époque France.

NOTES

[1] Tilburg does exempt such scholars as Philip Nord, *The Republican Moment: Struggles for Democracy in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995) and Miriam Levin, *Republican Art and Ideology in Late-Nineteenth-Century France* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1986).

[2] Philip Nord, *The Republican Moment*, p. 243 and Katherine Auspitz, *The Ligue de l'Enseignement and the Origins of the Third Republic 1866-1885* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), pp. 44-45.

[3] Mary Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-Siècle France* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Lenard Berlanstein, *Daughters of Eve: A Cultural History of French Theater Women from the Old Regime to the Fin-de-Siècle* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001); Jerrold Siegel, *Bohemian Paris: Culture, Politics, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987); Deborah Silverman *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology and Style* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

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