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3-1994

# Anna de Noailles Oui et Non: The Countess, the Critics, and la poésie féminine

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## Recommended Citation

Tama Lea Engelking. (1994). Anna de Noailles Oui et Non: The Countess, the Critics, and la poésie féminine. *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 23(2), 95-111, doi: 10.1080/00497878.1994.9979014.

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LA COMTESSE DE NOAILLES OUI ET NON: This is the curious title of Jean Cocteau's last book, written to pay homage to an idol of his youth, the early twentieth-century poet Anna de Noailles. It was not that Cocteau could not make up his mind about the countess, but that many of her contemporaries could not, and Cocteau frequently found himself defending the poetic genius of his friend.(1) Anna de Noailles has the dubious distinction of being the most written about *femme de lettres* of her day, because although she was by far the star woman poet of her generation, the quality of her poetry was a hotly debated topic, as were the reasons for her enormous popularity.(2) Reaction to her writing was mixture of *oui* and *non*, determined in part by the various biases and expectations of her readers. They adored or resented her for many different reasons, some of which were unrelated to her talent as a writer such as her foreign origins, political alliances, aristocratic name, commercial success, or the growing fear that women writers were narcissistic anti-social monsters. While the critics debated the merits of Noailles' work, the majority of readers--including men and women of letters such as Proust, Colette, and Maurice Barres--admired and appreciated her sensual lyricism. The "*oui*'s" seemed to triumph, because more so than even Colette, Noailles was the woman writer singled out by various institutions for official honors, among them a seat in the Belgian Academy of Language and Literature, a prize for poetry from the French Academy, and the coveted rank of Commander of the Legion of Honor. She earned the quasi-official status of the "Muse of the Republic," and because of her high public profile, literary critics continually turned to her poetry to illustrate what they began calling *la poesie feminine*.

Under the guise of official approval, Anna de Noailles was thus singled out as the representative "feminine" poet of the early twentieth century, a marginalizing label that reinforced rather than challenged the dominant ideology of the French literary establishment and the gender hierarchy supporting it. In fact, what Beatrice Slama refers to as "the subtle institutionalization of |sexual^ difference as inferiority," can be traced to this key period at the turn of the century when women's writing was beginning to be critically assessed (52). The Noailles debate was less about the countess than about the nature and value of women's writing in general. By saying *Oui* to Anna de Noailles, the best known and loved poet of her day, the French Academy and the institutions it represents were, in a sense, saying *Non* to a serious assessment of women's writing by helping to create and perpetuate a "safe" stereotype of the woman writer.

The nods of official approval sent in Noailles' direction offered little comfort to some of her more enlightened sister writers who recognized them as patronizing and token gestures based on a superficial appreciation of women's poetry. The poet Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, for instance, rejected the literary prizes offered her by the male-only French Academy, and refused the Legion of Honor three times. The expatriate salonniere Natalie Clifford Barney established an Academy of Women of her own which took the contribution of women writers more seriously.(3) Anna de Noailles' feminist consciousness was not raised to this level, however, and her legacy to modern readers is a far cry from what she naively imagined. The sensual poet who expressed her desire to be "only a loving mouth that tastes and drinks the universe" ("*Le verger de lis*")

Eblouissements) believed that the intense fervor of her verse would live on long after she was gone, and that readers would remember her "because my ashes will be warmer than their life" ("Les regrets" *L'ombre des jours*).<sup>(4)</sup> Her contemporaries were equally convinced that their children and children's children would be reading her poems as avidly as they did, and yet, Noailles' poems are rarely studied by modern students of French literature. Instead, if this influential, controversial, and colorful writer is read at all today, it is merely as the representative early twentieth-century "feminine" poet.<sup>(5)</sup> Her life continues to arouse interest, primarily because of her connections with important men of letters such as Maurice Barres, Marcel Proust and Jean Cocteau, and although several new biographies have appeared in recent years, her poetry is still sadly neglected.

My purpose here is not to reevaluate Anna de Noailles' work, although such a reevaluation is long overdue, but to look closely at how the concept of *poesie feminine* was related to her writing, and the consequences of this label for the generations of women readers and writers that followed. By examining the thinking that shaped *la poesie feminine* now, in the era of *l'écriture feminine*, we can ask what the feminist critics who are rethinking the notion of "feminine" writing can learn from the reception of Noailles' poetry by past and present readers of both sexes.<sup>(6)</sup> I will also suggest some directions that a reevaluation of her work might take.

Curiously, in our attempts to recover lost or forgotten women writers, feminist critics have overlooked Noailles' considerable oeuvre. While Colette, Noailles' friend and the only contemporary woman writer whose popularity rivaled her own, is now standard reading in French literary courses and a popular subject for literary scholarship, Anna de Noailles' writing has been virtually ignored. Part of the reason may be that the official recognition her work once received clashes with contemporary notions of the subversity of feminine writing. Much like Marceline Desbordes-Valmore, the representative French woman poet of the romantic period whom Barbara Johnson finds "hard to like" because she inspired so much praise from known misogynists such as Baudelaire, Noailles has received a cold shoulder from contemporary feminists who find it hard to like her image as it was promoted by the popular press, and the conformist brand of "femininity" she seemed to represent for early twentieth-century readers. Johnson makes the important point that "to the extent any woman poet is made to stand as a representative woman, to the extent that poetry by a woman is seen as an unproblematic and authentic representation of her specificity as a woman," her writing will only reinforce the traditional stereotypes of femininity, and will thus remain "unusable and invisible for feminism" (166, 170, emphasis Johnson's). The "feminine" label is problematic, and to a certain extent, I believe our current reaction to Noailles' poetry is determined by an urge to undermine the traditional masculine/feminine hierarchy to which her poetry is seen to conform, in much the same way her contemporaries reacted positively in order to preserve it. In other words, we have overlooked those aspects of her writing that are useable for feminism by buying into the "feminine" label critics applied to her poems, and by accepting her writing as either too conventionally "feminine" to be feminist, or not feminine enough, in the subversive sense used by proponents of *l'écriture feminine*. In either case, a reevaluation of her work, and especially the notions of feminine writing that were applied to her poems by early twentieth-century critics, is clearly in order.

Renee Vivien, a poet from the same era whose work has been enthusiastically revived by contemporary feminist readers, may have anticipated some of the reasons for the current indifference to Noailles on the part of feminists when she compared her own lack of popularity with the considerable success Noailles enjoyed at the turn of the century. Vivien's poem "Sans fleurs a votre front" (Without flowers around your head), published in 1906, was supposedly written in response to an insult she received from the countess. Vivien, whose lesbian poetry shocked her contemporaries, writes: "I am not of those whom the crowd praises, / But one who is hated. . . Because I dared to imagine / That a virgin in love is more beautiful than a man" (35).(7) The same collection contains "You for whom I wrote, O belles jeunes femmes!" (71), a poem Vivien probably composed in direct response to Noailles' much quoted poem "Offrande" (Offering) where she describes her ideal audience as male: "My books, I made them for you, o young men / And I left in their flesh / As do children who bite into apples / The marks of my teeth" (Les Eblouissements 315). Ironically, modern feminist readers, the female audience that Vivien opposed to Noailles' male readership, have acclaimed Vivien's poems for the very reason turn-of-century readers rejected them--their marginality! The reverse seems to apply to Noailles and raises a series of questions about her past, present and future readership. Are feminist readers more easily convinced of the conventional "femininity" of Noailles poems because she "marked" them for a male readership? To what extent does Noailles' former popularity and acceptance by the "establishment" disqualify her as a woman writer worth the trouble to read today? Does popular literature necessarily exclude subversion, or are there feminist elements in her writing that her token "feminine" status has masked? Before contemporary readers can say "non" to Anna de Noailles, we must determine to what extent our reaction is influenced by the "oui et non" her writing once received.

Anna de Noailles was born Princess Anna Elisabeth de Brancovan in Paris in 1876. The daughter of a Rumanian prince, and a pianist from an old and distinguished Greek family, Anna married into another notable family in 1897, when she became the wife of count Mathieu de Noailles. Four years later she launched her impressive career with the publication of *Le coeur innombrable* (The Innumerable Heart) which became a best-seller almost overnight. Over a period of more than thirty years, the countess wrote nearly 2,000 pages of verse in addition to several novels and an autobiography. Her poems were frequently anthologized and featured in popular series such as *La Bibliotheque Miniature*, and her books went into numerous printings--over thirty for her novel *La Nouvelle Esperance*. When Anna de Noailles published her first volume of poetry in 1901, the verdict on women's writing was still out. Until then, a woman of letters who achieved some degree of notoriety was considered an exception. However, at the turn of the century, women writers began invading the literary marketplace in unprecedented numbers.(8) Instead of turning to a traditionally female-dominated genre such as the novel, more and more women began writing lyric poetry, a trend fueled by Noailles' enormous popularity. The magazine *Femina*, for example, received over nine thousand entries in response to a contest of women's poetry they sponsored in 1903.

The prolific production and extreme popularity of women writers, particularly poets, demanded a critical assessment of this new phenomenon. Between 1901 and 1910 numerous articles and six major books of criticism were published in France that dealt specifically with what critics began to label *la poesie feminine*.(9) They put forth a neat formula that could encompass all poetry by women by identifying woman's "feminine nature" as the source of her writing. Considering the

disparate reactions to Anna de Noailles' writing by her contemporaries, and the obvious differences between her poetry and that of, say, Rene Vivien, it is surprising that critics were able to arrive at a consensus. In 1901, literary critics were hard-pressed to decide whether this initial surge of women's writing represented a revolution or a fad. But by the time the First World War broke out, predictably shifting attention from women writers to a new generation of male writers, critics had satisfied themselves that a feminine literary revolution would not take place. Noailles was still in the headlines, but not for long. The sexist discourse of *la poesie* had already set the wheels of marginalization in motion.

With the dawn of the New Woman and the women's rights movement, a revolution of sorts was taking place in the twentieth century which was quickly proclaimed "the century of women," but the literature, art and science of this period helped stifle the potential revolt that was brewing. "Woman" was one of the most popular subjects explored by late nineteenth and early twentieth-century artists, writers, and scientists. Fin-de-siecle art as well as literature consistently represented woman as bacchant, siren, nymph, more vegetal and bestial than she was human.(10) Male intellectuals perpetuated a common fantasy of the "feminine" that emphasized the sensual and dionysian nature of Woman. The prevailing notion of the "feminine" at the turn of the century was reinforced by Darwin's scientific theories and the recent works of sexologists such as Havelock Ellis.(11)

Fundamentally flawed scientific evidence was cited to prove that woman's nature resulted from her biological inferiority. Writing in 1879, the eminent French social psychologist Gustave Le Bon, was able to dismiss the intelligent woman as a freak:

In the most intelligent races, as among the Parisians, there are a large number of women whose brains are closer in size to those of gorillas than to the most developed male brains. . . . All psychologists who have studied the intelligence of women, as well as poets and novelists, recognize today that they represent the most inferior forms of human evolution and that they are closer to children and savages than to an adult, civilized man. They excel in fickleness, inconstancy, absence of thought and logic, and incapacity to reason. Without a doubt, there exist some distinguished women, very superior to the average man, but they are as exceptional as the birth of any monstrosity, as, for example, of a gorilla with two heads; consequently, we may neglect them entirely. (Qtd. in Gould, 104-5)

Le Bon's misogyny is obvious, but his remarks raise the question: Was the woman writer perceived as an intellectual inferior who fell far short of male standards, or was she, like the two-headed gorilla, a monster? The mixed response to Noailles suggests a little of both.

While certain critics were prepared to treat women writers as substandard imitators of men, others saw them as monsters. Paul Flat used that very word in *Nos Femmes de lettres* (1909):

The literary woman is a monster in the Latin sense of the word. She is a monster because she is anti-natural. She is anti-natural because she is anti-social, and if she is anti-social, final term in this line of reasoning, it is that she reproduces, as in a striking microcosm, a great deal of the fermentation which is degenerating our modern world. (218)

According to Flat's logic, the social order is threatened by the literary woman. Writing during the era of the New Woman when women were slowly gaining rights society had previously denied them, Flat was correct in reading the success of women writers such as Noailles as a warning. The Latin origin of the word monster is *monstrum* meaning an evil omen, which is from *monere*, to remind, to warn.

Another critic who tried to warn his readers of the threat imposed by women writers was the right-wing ideologue Charles Maurras who helped lead the nationalistic (and anti-Dreyfus) French Action movement. Maurras was adamantly opposed to change, and like Flat, he believed that the social/sexual hierarchy, in which woman's primary role was that of nurturer and mother, was threatened by the narcissistic woman writer whose only thoughts were for herself. In his essay "Feminine Romanticism" (1903), Maurras judges the work of four poets, Anna de Noailles, Rene Vivien, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus and Gerard d'Houville (Marie de Regnier), according to how closely it conforms to his idea of the feminine. When their writing transgresses the narrow boundaries of conventional femininity, Maurras is quick to call them dangerous and unnatural. Maurras condemns Vivien, for example, because she represents "the lesbian threat" (230). In the case of Noailles, her principal danger is identified as indiscretion (228). Maurras is distressed by Noailles' first novel in which she paints a particularly detailed psychological portrait of a woman's search for sexual and emotional satisfaction. He cannot forgive the author for letting the veil fall, and feels that Noailles betrays her sex by unveiling the mystery he believes essential to femininity (225). Jean de Gourmont, on the other hand, praised Noailles' sincerity and was thrilled by what he called the "physiology" of women's poetry. He compared the act of writing to a striptease in which the female poet reveals all for the pleasure of the voyeuristic male reader. In *Muses d'aujourd'hui: Essai de physiologie poetique* (*Muses of Today: Essay on Poetic Physiology*, 1910) Gourmont describes poetry as a transposed "expression of a state of physical desire" which the male poet directs toward the conquest of women (19). Following this phallogentric line of reasoning, he concludes: "It is therefore necessary for feminine poetry to be the other side of sexuality, in that it shows us the desire of woman to be seized" (27).

Outrageous remarks of this sort have not gone unnoticed. Although Maurras is more subtle than Gourmont, Elaine Marks has brilliantly demonstrated how he uses the romantic label to "prove" the inherent inferiority of women. Her analysis corresponds with the theory developed by Christine Battersby in *Gender and Genius*. She argues that "the Romantic conception of genius was particularly harmful for women" (23) because the "feminine" traits so valued when applied to male Romantic writers--subjectivity, emotion, a close relationship to nature, inspiration--were degraded when applied to women. Moreover, because these characteristics were seen as part of woman's nature, her inferiority was understood as natural and therefore irreversible.

The points made by Marks and Battersby are born out in the case of Anna de Noailles. One of the principal attractions of the "Feminine Romantics" is their emphasis on the personal, something they share with male Romantic poets. Noailles admired the Romantic poets, modeled her first poems after Alfred de Musset's poetry, and considered Victor Hugo her spiritual father, but Leon Blum is careful to distinguish her lyricism from that of her Romantic predecessors. Although one critic even called Noailles a "French Walt Whitman" whose poetry was "one long song of herself," Blum takes the wind out of comparisons:

Without a doubt, the lyricism of Lamartine, of Musset, or even Hugo is a purely personal lyricism. But if the poet is singing himself, he is not singing for himself alone. The poem, coming from a man, is valid for all men. . . . There is no equivalent of this in Madame the Noailles' work. She is the unique subject of her poems. (229).(12)

Using a surprisingly masculine image, Blum continues by comparing Noailles' narcissistic poetry to a fountain, "Her poetry surges forth from her and falls back again like a gushing jet of water into its basin" (229). Like many other male critics, Blum was uncomfortable with such poetic self-indulgence on the part of women writers. His image of the fountain suggests that he saw Noailles' poetry as a form of female masturbation that withheld pleasure from men. In this light, it is interesting to note that Marcel Coulon condemned Noailles' love poetry as a reversal of Baudelaire's famous "sois charmante et tais-toi" (be charming and shut up)! (Coulon 371).

Although the turn-of-the-century critics I have mentioned so far approach the writing of women differently, they all seem to agree on one point--the only acceptable woman writer is one who conforms to traditional notions of the feminine. La poesie feminine could neutralize the threat of the monstrous woman by safely containing her within the rhetoric of binary oppositions. Instead of being threatened by Noailles' narcissism, critics could refer to it as an example of her limited subjectivity, further evidence of women's innate inferiority. Held up as an example of la poesie feminine, Noailles' poetry seemed to match this picture of feminine writing. A sensual and narcissistic appreciation of nature, coupled by a fear of death, dominate her poetry which evolved little over her thirty year career, proving, according to some critics, that she was an "inspired" rather than intellectual writer. To further emphasize the literary short-comings of women writers, critics focused on Anna de Noailles' many technical weaknesses including her tendency to rhyme for the ear and not the eye, her often miscounted alexandrine verses, the loose structures she favored, and her overuse of adjectives which earned her the title "Muse of the Adjectives." Her poems often seem like endless variations of her favorite themes, and Pierre Lievre complained "All Madame de Noailles has done for more than a quarter of a century is repeat herself" (104).

Read on a superficial level, Noailles fits into a critical paradigm that locked so-called feminine poetry into the realm of the spontaneous, the emotional, the personal and the material, and thus removed it from the abstract, intellectual, and universal realm of masculine, that is, "serious" art. This interpretation of Noailles' work is extremely narrow, and contemporary readers can easily see through the binary thinking underlying the assumed differences between masculine and feminine writing advanced by her critics, but it does help explain the popularity of la poesie feminine, and particularly Noailles' work, during the early twentieth century.

At the turn of the century it was widely believed that the public had become saturated with the "objective" scientific observations of realist and naturalist writers, tired by the nebulous musings of the symbolists, and bored by Parnassian discipline. Instead of reason, readers wanted love; instead of scientific objectivity, they wanted a free reign given to intuition and to the senses; instead of order, they wanted a deluge of sensual images, a return to nature and the moi of the Romantics. What the popular aesthetic of 1900 demanded belonged firmly to the realm of the "feminine," which critics understood as something monolithic and static. Underlying their idea of woman's feminine nature was the belief that woman's writing, like woman herself, would not

evolve, and that la poesie feminine was therefore a literature of the moment with short-lived appeal. Consequently, the contribution of women writers was not taken seriously, and because it appeared rooted in instincts and emotions instead of the intellect, le lyrisme feminin, according to some definitions, was not even literature at all!

Critics were clearly judging Noailles against a standard that she happily ignored; moreover, their claims were often self-serving, and made at the expense of many more gifted women writers whose poems conformed more closely to the strict rules of conventional French prosody.(13) Today we might reverse this early indictment and read Noailles' disregard for prosodic conventions as a conscious attempt to find forms better suited to an expression of women's experience, and by a refusal to be molded by a male-authored tradition. This possibility was never raised by her contemporaries, possibly because her unprecedented popularity "proved" that her poems suited the public's taste. Her most out-spoken enemies were literary purists and jealous authors whose motives for putting down her writing were more often made in the service of their pocketbooks, than in the service of literature. They reacted to the changing nature of the literary market place by making the conspicuous success of Anna de Noailles the primary target for their antagonism.

The new wave of popular women writers, led by Noailles, clearly damaged some male egos. In *La Litterature feminine d'aujourd'hui* ("Feminine Literature of Today" 1909), for example, Jules Bertaut calls on his male readers to acknowledge the low blow dealt them by women writers:

Let us have the courage and sincerity to admit, from the first page of this book; the success of today's feminine literature has been staggering, it took us all by surprise, it mortified us, it humiliated us all a little. (1)

Paul Flat describes the reaction of literary men to the sensational popularity of women writers as one of "humiliation and wounded pride." In an obvious reference to Noailles, he identifies the most humiliated person of all as "the effaced husband of a woman whose name is habitually printed in the newspapers" (*Nos femmes de lettres* xi). Jean Calvert, however, did not implicate Noailles' poor husband, but instead placed the blame for her success squarely on her readers:

There have always been "snobs"; today there are as many as ever, and they have had a decisive influence not on literature (*la litterature*), but on the bookstore (*la librairie*): Some fashionable clique need only introduce a new book as if introducing someone to high society, in order for the special press, which prides itself on being up to date, to immediately celebrate its qualities; and also for those conceited little flatterers who, wishing to appear in the know, to pretend to have read it, and to have fainted while reading it. Thus have many reputations and glories been born. This might explain why Madame the countess de Noailles is regarded by many as one of the greatest writers of our day. (Calvert 5-6)

Calvert's description of Noailles' readers supposes a basic opposition between the educated taste of the well-read and literary-minded reader representing an elite *litterature*, and the questionable taste of the *librairie*. The intrusion of mass media into what was once a sort of exclusive men's club, meant that *Litterature* could no longer afford to ignore the growing number of middle class women readers. Aggravated by the example of Anna de Noailles' popularity, *hommes de lettres*



feared they would be forced to become *hommes d'affaires*. Some literary men like Colette's publicity-minded husband Willy even capitalized on that fact. As Calvert rightly observes, a large degree of Anna de Noailles' success as a writer can be attributed to the purely commercial aspects of her enormous snob appeal which kept her constantly in the public eye. Not only was she an aristocratic beauty who frequented the salons of the rich and famous, but she was immensely quotable, photogenic, and often seen in the company of literary celebrities such as Jean Cocteau, Maurice Barres, Robert de Montesquiou and Proust. She was a media personality, and the sensational press coverage she received was bound to influence the reception of her poetry by a large and varied audience.

Although Noailles was popular among middle class readers, Calvert conveniently overlooks the fact that she was also idolized by a generation of young male writers, and imitated by a number of men and women poets. If anything, her popularity shows how the line separating *la librairie* and *la littérature* was beginning to blur. Noailles' poetry was read by the entire Parisian literary elite. Her correspondence with writers such as Cocteau, Proust, Barres, Pierre Loti and others suggests that her writing was not only appreciated by these writers, but in many cases had a direct influence on their work. The author Edith Wharton, for example, felt an affinity with Anna de Noailles' poetry that she described as "almost a self revelation." She was "indescribably attracted to Anna de Noailles' poetry" and to the woman herself with whom she developed a close friendship (Lewis 162). Marcel Proust was another appreciative friend and reader who, in a letter to Noailles dated May 1901, described his first reaction to her poetry: ". . . I felt the awakening of a new literary passion which I did not know how to satisfy, comparable to the first time I saw a Gustave Moreau or heard a melody by Faure (I mention these because they were passions and not for their value, that can be questioned)" (220).(14) Proust was always overblown in his praise of Noailles' work, but his biographer George Painter has argued that her lyricism influenced *A la recherche du temps perdu*. According to Painter, Noailles' nostalgic description of her youth gave Proust important insights into his own (II, 16).(15)

The homage that Robert Honnert paid to Anna de Noailles in a special edition of *Les nouvelles littéraires* suggests the scope of her influence. He claims to speak for a "nous" (us) which might be understood as the many other (male) writers who also contributed articles on Noailles to this commemorative issue, or it could refer to an entire generation of readers:

Between overly heavy hopes, and desires too new, the young man sometimes likes to listen to a hot voice that fixes and nourishes his dreams. Madame de Noailles was for me that voice. As she was for hundreds of others, and will always be, I believe, for the children that will succeed each other on the surface of this earth. . . We all have the memory of (slight modification of translation to read better) some afternoon pined away or some clear morning where we seized her poems and lived out some of those feverish moments that remain the highlights of a life. (2)

In the same issue of *Les nouvelles littéraires*, Francois Mauriac says of Noailles "This young woman lent her voice to the whole of tormented youth. He, along with Honnert, clearly anticipated that Noailles' "hot voice" would continue to touch generations of new readers. But given her current state of neglect, how could so many educated people be so shortsighted in their estimation of Noailles' influence? Her poetry appealed to male and female readers, to an intellectual elite and ordinary folks alike because she brought writing back to a personal and

material level which readers of both sexes and many walks of life could appreciate. At a time when writers took themselves very seriously as intellectuals, and expected their readers to do the same, she brought pleasure back into reading and writing. Yet, as we have seen, this asset was turned against her by critics who argued that because her poems were "feminine," they could not be universal.

Anna de Noailles may have been singing for herself alone, but her songs struck a sympathetic chord among readers of both sexes. Unfortunately, institutionalized clichés about feminine writing succeeded in stifling the resonance of her music. The echo that has reached modern readers barely hints at the power of her voice, and the influence it had on her admirers. The great irony of Noailles' fate lies in the fact that while her poems were praised for their conformity to a feminine ideal, she delighted in non-conformity. Far from being a dutiful daughter, Anna de Noailles considered herself an anarchist of sorts. She was indifferent to the critical assessment of her poems as technically inferior, and even flaunted the spontaneity of her verses which she claimed came to her whole, "dictated by the stars," so there was never a need for corrections or revisions. For Noailles, inspiration was everything; poetry was felt, not learned.

Rather than apologize for her disregard of standard literary forms and conventions, Anna de Noailles reveled in a freedom from restrictions that she felt separated her from male writers. As she once told Jean Larnac in an interview, "I had the luck of escaping from all constraint. A man cannot. He has to waste the best years of his life in school, whereas I, I was free" (Larnac 232). The countess clearly associated freedom from intellectual constraint with lack of formal education, and was thus able to situate herself outside of the mainstream of established literary movements, labels, and forms which she felt were irrelevant and even detrimental to poetic creation. Some of her contemporaries felt the same way. Writing nostalgically about her generation of "barbaric" women poets, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus complained about the artifice of modern women writers who "have diplomas, and are the daughters and granddaughters of women with diplomas" (n. pag.). She insists that this "artificial race" has little in common with "the fresh invasion of Barbarians" that debuted at the turn of the century. In other words, if "feminine" poets such as Noailles and Delarue-Mardrus felt they were different from their male counterparts, it was not because they were slaves to their "feminine" natures, but, on the contrary, because they did not feel restricted by the conventions of a male-authored literary tradition.

Noailles, an extremely sensual poet who delighted in the natural world, claimed that Mother Nature, not feminine nature, served as her only model and guide. In her autobiography, she characterizes the poet as a free and multiple being: "One feels strongly that the poet has the privilege of being multiple, of being able to prove one's sincere abundance, of not being enclosed by anything" (Livre de ma vie 11). Her own poetic indiscretions were many, and she admitted in her acceptance address to the Royal Belgian Academy, "I sometimes tore with an imprudent wing the perfect fabric of language" (Cocteau 184). One of Noailles' recent biographers downplays the power of her words by interpreting this image as a reference to the bumblebee, a favorite symbol for this garden poet who drew her inspiration from nature. Addressing an audience of distinguished men of letters, it was just as likely that the well-read countess had Mallarmé's swan in mind when she spoke those words, for she took great pleasure in stretching her wings beyond the icy confines of literary convention.

Anna de Noailles' writing did not inspire a poetic revolution. Although she advocated a policy of creative freedom for writers of both sexes, her disregard of French prosody was highlighted instead to reinforce the notion of *la poesie feminine* as spontaneous and inspired rather than rational and intellectual. There is no small irony in comparing her present token status with the outrageous sense of delight she expressed in her own uniqueness. She may have dismayed and thrilled her readers, but it was impossible to remain indifferent to her powerful lyricism. It seems clear to me that readers were not attracted to her poetry because it was typically feminine, but because it was uniquely hers, the expression of a sensitive and sensual lyricism, that few writers, regardless of their sex, have come close to imitating.

Sadly and ironically, Anna de Noailles' poetry provided the model for *la poesie feminine*, a fate that the countess would surely have deplored. The "feminine" label did not serve the contemporary and future readers of Noailles' poetry well. As the feminist critic Beatrice Slama reminds us, "Marginality is subversive; marginalization is not" (71). The example of Anna de Noailles illustrates the truth of this maxim which describes the relationship between literary institutions and sexual difference. When it comes to women writers, modern readers have inherited a legacy of marginalization that must be constantly reexamined in light of an ongoing feminist inquiry into the relationship between writing, gender and literary tradition. If we look behind Anna de Noailles' guise as token "feminine" poet, we find a poet whose indifference to the standards of a masculine literary tradition can be understood as a defiant gesture. It may be useful, for example, to examine the ways in which her notion of the poet as "a multiple being" allowed her to absorb diverse and apparently conflicting influences and to escape from what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar call "the anxiety of authorship." (16)

Modern readers may not appreciate the aesthetics of Noailles' verse, but the reception of her poetry is a valuable example of how texts are read and why. My emphasis in this discussion has been influenced by Elaine Marks' suggestion: "It may be more politically effective to read excluded or marginal texts not as forgotten or neglected pieces that will now take their rightful place, but rather as case histories of the ways in which prescription and proscription operate in discourses that inform literature and culture" (175). My own sense is that Noailles may yet find a place in the female literary tradition if we look beyond the twin indictments of her poetry as "feminine" and "popular" which have effectively masked any feminist elements in her work and led us to grossly underestimate her influence on the men and women of letters who admired her. The question of whether Noailles' poetry is valuable for modern readers, however, can not be answered with a simple yes or no, but as Cocteau suggested, the most appropriate response may be both *oui et non*.

#### Notes

N.B. A version of this article was presented at the Twentieth-Century Literature Conference sponsored by the University of Louisville in February, 1989.

1. Cocteau's book, which is more of a personal portrait of Noailles than a critical analysis of her work, was written specifically in response to Andre Gide's decision to exclude her work from an anthology of French poetry he edited. However, in several letters to the countess, Gide expressed his admiration of her writing. For selections from Noailles' correspondence and a discussion of

her relationship with literary figures such as Gide, Cocteau, Proust, Maurice Barres, and Pierre Loti, see Claude Mignot-Ogliastri and Elisabeth Higonnet-Dugua.

2. The bibliography compiled by Jean Larnac in his comprehensive study of Noailles' life and work lists over 300 articles on Noailles from the period 1901-1931.

3. Natalie Clifford Barney writes about her Academy of Women in *Aventures de l'esprit* (Paris, 1929; rpt. Paris: Persona, 1982). There are many accounts of her salon, see for example Barney's biographies *Portrait d'une seductrice* (Paris: Stock, 1976) by Jean Chalon, and George Wickes' *The Amazon of Letters: The Life and Loves of Natalie Barney* (NY: Putman, 1977). Essential background reading for any discussion of early twentieth-century women writers is Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940* (Austin: U of Texas Press, 1986).

4. Anna de Noailles' major works of poetry are: *Le coeur innombrable*, (*The Innumerable Heart*, 1901), *L'ombre des jours* (*The Shadow of Days*, 1902), *Les éblouissements* (*Dazzlings*, 1907), *Les vivants et les morts* (*The living and the Dead*, 1924), *L'honneur de souffrir* (*The Honor of suffering*, 1927), *Mes poemes d'enfance* (*My Childhood Poems*, 1928), *Choix de poesie* (*Choice of Poems*, 1930; reprinted for her centennial in 1979), *Derniers vers et poemes d'enfance* (*Last Verses and Childhood Poems*, 1934). In addition to her autobiography, *Le livre de ma vie* (1932). Noailles wrote three novels: *La nouvelle esperance* (*New Hope*, 1903), *Le visage émerveille* (*The Amazed Face*, 1904), and *La domination* (1905). Very little has been written about Noailles in English, and only a few of her poems have been translated. All translations from the French are mine unless otherwise indicated. For a general introduction in English to her life and work, see the essay on Anna de Noailles by Tama Lea Engelking in *French Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Source Book*, eds. D. Zimmerman and E. Sartori (NY: Greenwood Press, 1991).

5. One of the standard textbooks for studying French literary history is by Andre Lagarde and Laurent Michaud. Their volume on *Twentieth-Century Literature* (1973 edition) devotes two pages to "la poesie feminine," and the only two poems reproduced in this section are by Anna de Noailles. Feminist critics such as Germaine Bree who have surveyed the space allotted to women writers in anthologies and histories of French literature note how heavily the academic cards are stacked against women writers. According to Bree, "the figures clearly imply that on the whole women's work is largely considered to be irrelevant within the mainstream of French literature in the making. Hence, in the best of intentions, those segregated chapters on 'women poets' or 'women novelists' only underscore the implications they try, rather patronizingly, to improve (202).

6. Helene Cixous' "The Laugh of the Medusa" is considered the seminal text on *écriture féminine*. For a general discussion of the term and Cixous' theories, see Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (NY: Methuen, 1985), 102-126.

7. *At the Sweet Hour of Hand in Hand* by Rene Vivien, trans. Sandia Belgrade. The original may be found in *Poemes de Rene Vivien*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1923; rpt. New York: Arno, 1975). For more on Vivien see Karla Jay, *The Amazon and the Page: Natalie Clifford Barney and Rene Vivien* (Bloomington: U of Indiana P, 1988), and Benstock.

8. Women poets who published their first works in France at the turn of the century include Rene Vivien, *Etudes et preludes* (1901); Natalie Clifford Barney, *Quelques sonnet-portraits de demmes* (1900), Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, *Occident* (1901), Jean Dominique, *Un got de sel et d'ametume* (1899), Marie Dauget, *A travers le voile* (1902), Marguerite Burnat-Provins, *Tableaux valaisans* (1902), Helene Picard, *La feuille morte* (1903), and Cecile Perin, *Vivre* (1906).

9. The books listed by Clarissa Cooper in *Women Poets of the Twentieth Century in France: A Critical Bibliography* (NY: King's Crown Press, 1943) are *La litterature feminine d'aujourd'hui* (1908) by Jules Bertaut, *Les poetesses ridicules* (1908) by J. M. Lentillon, *Les muses francaises* (1909) by Alphonse Seche, Jean Bonneton's *La corbeille des roses on des dames de lettres* (1908), Paul Flat's *Nos femmes de lettres* (1909), and *Muses d'aujourd'hui* (1910) by Jean de Gourmont.

10. See Bram Dijkstra's excellent study of the "iconography of misogyny" *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-siecle Culture* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1986).

11. Cynthia Eagle Russett examines the scientific literature concerning the "woman question" in *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 1989).

12. T.S. Eliot's famous statement "The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates," shows the type of thinking that values poetic distance to the detriment of "personal" poetry by women. Two insightful discussions of women poets and poetic persona are Marilyn Farwell, "Feminist Criticism and the Concept of the Poetic Persona," *Bucknell Review: Women's Literature and Criticism* 24.1 (Spring 1978): 139-56; and Margaret Homans, *Women Writers and Poetic Identity* (Princeton U P, 1980). Domna Stanton's excellent introduction to *The Defiant Muse: French Feminist Poems from the Middle Ages to the Present* (NY: Feminist Press, 1986) places women poets in the context of a French female literary tradition. Note, however, that she excludes both Marceline Debordes-Valmore and Anna de Noailles from this important bilingual anthology because their work does not meet the feminist criteria she establishes. See also Barbara Johnson on this point.

13. Renee Vivien and Lucie Delarue-Mardrus were both conscientious crafters of conventional verse. Vivien in particular produced verses considered among the most perfect in the French language, no small feat since English, not French, was her native language! Delarue-Mardrus was the only woman from this period to write a formal "Art poetique" in which she insists that hard work and inspiration must go hand in hand.

14. During her lifetime, the only correspondence Noailles allowed published was with Proust: *Correspondance generale de Proust* (Paris: Plon, 1931). Her extensive correspondence with Barres was legally closed to the public until 1992.

15. Speaking of Noailles' *Les eblouissements*, Painter also argues that her "voluptuous, anguished and truly 'dazzling' poems, by their technical influence during the next few years upon Valery and Cocteau, were to help bridge the gap between symbolism and the twentieth-century"

(410). Painter is one of the few critics to take Noailles' influence on other writers seriously. Larnac, despite his admiration for her poetry, completely discounts the possibility that Anna de Noailles will have any lasting influence on literature because she failed to develop a school and to train disciples. He does, however give her credit for bringing alexandrine verse back into vogue during a period of "poetic anarchy" (Larnac 71).

16. In *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale U P, 1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar define woman's fear of not being able to write because of her gender as "the anxiety of authorship." In their more recent *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale U P, 1988), they frame the woman writers' relationship to her maternal and paternal literary heritage in terms of "the affiliation complex."

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Abstract:

Jean Cocteau pays tribute to his idol, the poet Anna de Noailles, in the 'La Comtesse de Noailles Oui Et Non.' Anna de Noailles is one of the most popular and widely admired among the 20th-century poets because of her unique talent and controversial topics. Her sensual lyricsm has received the criticism of many writers. Likewise, it has also been admired by great critics, such as Proust, Colette and Maurice Barres.