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"La mise en scène de la femme-écrivain:"

Colette, Anna de Noailles, and Nature

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Robert Cottrell has suggested that “for Colette as for most women writers of her times, nature was a garden, an enclosure that approximated a room of her own” in that it provided a refuge from Parisian society and

from the “hypocrisy of men” (9). Cottrell’s notion seems appropriate for a writer who grew up in Sido’s garden, and whose close observations of the animal and vegetable kingdom make up a large part of her work and an enduring part of her personal myth. Yet, too close an association with nature has often served as a trap for women writers whose writing becomes essentialized when it is perceived as springing from both the natural, material world, with which woman is closely identified, as well as from her own so-called “feminine” nature (i.e. intuitive, spontaneous, emotional). Such sexist stereotypes of women’s writing thrived in the work of early twentieth-century literary critics. They based their understanding of women’s writing on restrictive dualistic thinking that defined a feminine mode of writing in opposition to a masculine mode. Women, they argued, produce texts that result from their closer relationship to their bodies, physical senses and to Nature. Their writing was thus seen as spontaneous, instinctive, natural, sensual, and much more primitive than the more rational and intellectual writing produced by men. According to such logic, the more earthbound nature of women’s writing kept them from rising above their senses, and prohibited the possibility of a spiritual, abstract, or intellectual dimension to the literature women produced. Taking a cue from the Decadents, critics saw the domain of real art as the artificial, whereas woman was firmly ensconced in nature.

Although feminist critics have long since deconstructed the gender hierarchy supporting such stereotyped notions of women’s writing, these notions were alive and well in the early twentieth century where they represented both good news and bad news for a nature writer such as Colette. Although Colette’s work is by no means limited to

subjects taken from nature, her readers came to know and love her primarily for her lyrical portraits of plants and animals. According to Marine Rambach, Colette’s critics, “surtout dans la première moitié du siècle, a mis l’accent sur les sujets bucoliques et campagnards” (24).¹ On the one hand, gender stereotypes help explain the popularity of writers such as Colette at the turn of the last century when contemporary readers, who felt the need to reconnect with Nature and their senses, turned to women’s writing in a reaction against the overly abstract and intellectual writing of the Symbolists and the Parnassian movement.² As André Billy explains, “Il se produisait alors contre le Symbolisme et le Parnasse une sorte d’explosion de libération, sous forme de retour à la Nature. Or, la Nature c’était essentiellement l’affaire des femmes. Elles le firent bien voir” (*L’Epoque* 1900 217). On the other hand, the bias against “feminine” writing allowed critics to dismiss it as falling short of any real artistic achievement. Instead, they saw it as a short-lived fad tied to a specific historical moment, rather than a bona fide literary movement with any lasting impact. This is the conclusion Jean Larnac reaches about women writers in his 1929 *Histoire de la littérature féminine en France*: “Si bien qu’écœurées de ne pouvoir participer à l’évolution de la littérature générale, elles se sont abandonnées à leur nature, sans souci des écoles ou des théories (225).

French literary history has borne out this bias for the most part as many early twentieth-century women writers have faded into obscurity, with the exception of the two most high profile nature writers—Colette and Anna de Noailles. As I have argued elsewhere, Anna de Noailles has the dubious distinction of being singled out as the representative “feminine” poet of her generation, a marginalizing label that has had negative consequences despite her prominent place in literary manuals. Subsequent generations of women readers have often overlooked her writing as “either too conventionally ‘feminine’ to be feminist, or not *feminine* enough, in the subversive sense used by proponents of *l’écriture féminine*” (Engelking 97).³ In Colette’s case, however, I want to consider how her

enduring place in the French literary canon can be linked in part to the way she consciously cultivated an image of herself as a writer of Nature, *without* being reduced to a negative feminine stereotype like the one that marginalized Noailles. Following up on Cottrell's notion of the garden as a room of one's own, I want to look specifically at nature as a sort of theatrical stage set where Colette created her public persona as a fin-de-siècle *femme de lettres*. Bypassing the bulk of Colette's creative writing, where references to nature abound, I focus here instead on those texts such as letters, speeches, interviews, and memoirs, where she is representing herself as a professional writer, essentially playing out a real-life role as a literary personality in what I call "la mise-en-scène de la femme écrivain."⁴ These are the texts where Colette could influence her readers' perceptions of her as a writer with nature serving as one of the most effective stage settings for her original interpretation of the woman writer which, as we'll see, she sometimes performed at the expense of writers such as Anna de Noailles.

This dramatic framework seems justified by Colette's career as a performer. Not only did Colette appear on the music hall stage, but, having learned her writing trade from the king of marketing—her first husband Henry Gauthier-Villars, known as Willy—she was skilled at what André Billy called "le côté théâtre des mœurs littéraires" ("La vie littéraire" n. pag.). Colette, of course, shared the stage with many other women writers, most notably the poet whom critics dubbed "La Muse du jardin," Anna, la comtesse de Noailles. Noailles was a dramatic performer in her own right. She grew up in a Parisian salon culture where she was called upon to recite poetry to her mother's friends from a young age, and she never stopped trying to impress her audience. She was constantly in the public eye as she married into one of the oldest families in the French aristocracy and kept company with many of the political and literary personalities of her day. Anna de Noailles provides a convenient point of comparison for my discussion of Colette and nature since the names of these two high profile writers were often linked. They shared a mutual love for the natural

world and readers perceived their sensual lyric styles as inspired by similar feminine sensibilities. For Colette, whose complex and ambiguous identity as a *femme de lettres* is notoriously difficult to sort out, the inevitable comparisons with Noailles offered her a valuable opportunity to distinguish her own writing from Noailles's "feminine" lyricism. What I call Colette's "peasant" persona emerges from this analysis in response to and in contrast with the princess persona that Colette, along with many readers of her generation, associated with Noailles. Played out against the lush green setting of nature, their respective roles shed light on contemporary reactions to their public personae that helps explain their very different status in French studies today, and why Anna de Noailles's work merits reevaluation.

Jean Cocteau's 1955 reception speech to the Académie royale de langue et de littérature françaises de Belgique offers an ideal departure point for comparing Anna de Noailles and Colette. Cocteau devoted his "Discours de réception" not only to the customary appreciation of his predecessor, Colette, but also to her predecessor, Anna de Noailles, both of whom he had known well. To his distinguished literary audience, he offered this summary of the two best-known women writers of their generation: "L'une avait du génie à revendre et le gaspilla. L'autre en avait plein une tirelire et sut à merveille en faire usage"(11). Cocteau elaborated on the comparison, explaining that "La comtesse courtisait la gloire qui est femme et la gloire se détournait d'elle. Madame Colette méprisait la gloire et la gloire lui courut après... Elle vécut comme si la gloire n'existait pas. La gloire tomba dans le panneau et, alors que la comtesse, qui tant l'adula, s'en voyait cruellement et injustement abandonnée, Colette en fit son esclave..."(20).

Cocteau could not have made these comments thirty years earlier when the comtesse de Noailles was the darling of the literary world and outshone even Colette. Readers of that period usually gave Noailles' poetry a slight edge over Colette's prose, voting for example, to award Noailles the title of "Princesse de Lettres" in 1927, and choosing her over Colette as the woman who most merited elec-

tion to the French Academy in 1910.⁵ As far as official honors go, Noailles had a slight lead there too, with her first book of poetry earning a prize from the Académie Française, which also awarded her their prestigious “Grand prix de la littérature” in 1921, the same year Noailles was elected to the Belgian Academy. Both writers were awarded titles as Chevalier de la Légion d’honneur in the same promotion, but Noailles had the added distinction of being the first woman to earn the title of Commandeur de la Légion d’Honneur.

Yet, speaking from the perspective of 1955, it was already clear to Cocteau what we, fifty years later, know so well: Colette has endured whereas the so-called “génie” of Anna de Noailles was not enough to secure the glory that she, along with many of the most respected writers and literary critics of her day, had predicted for her writing. In 1913, the London *Times Literary Supplement* declared her “the greatest poet that the twentieth-century has produced in France and maybe in Europe,” and when she died in 1933, ten thousand devoted fans showed up at her funeral to mourn her loss. The articles included in the commemorative issue of *Les Nouvelles littéraires* that year suggest how deeply her writing touched her generation. Robert Honnert, for example, recalls those afternoons devoted to reading and reciting Noailles’s fevered verses as among the most memorable of his youth, and he predicts that future generations would share his enthusiasm. “Nous avons tous dans notre mémoire quelque après-midi, quelque matinée claire où nous avons saisi ses poèmes et vécu quelques-unes de ces minutes de fièvre qui restent les points de repère d’une vie”(2). Proust was another devoted reader of Anna de Noailles who, according to some critics, served as a sort of Socratic midwife for his ideas. Catherine Perry, for example, credits Proust’s reading of Noailles’s 1907 volume, *Les Éblouissements*, with providing the guiding principal behind *A la recherche du temps perdu* (“Flagorneur ou ébloui?” 49).

That the lyricism that so stirred Honnert, Proust, and their contemporaries has failed to impress today’s readers seems obvious when you consider that Noailles’s three novels, nine books of poetry,

several collections of prose and an autobiography are out of print, whereas Colette’s complete works are now available in a prestigious four volume Pléiade edition. Although Noailles is still regularly anthologized as the representative “feminine” poet of her generation, her life has attracted much more attention than her work. A replica of her bedroom, for example, was added to the Carnavalet Museum in Paris, and in 1997 a documentary on Noailles aired on French TV. While there have been a number of recent biographies and critical editions of her correspondence, relatively few serious treatments of her poetry other than an occasional doctoral dissertation have appeared with one important exception. Catherine Perry’s *Persphone Unbound: Dionysian Aesthetics in the Works of Anna de Noailles*, published in 2003, is the first book-length study of Noailles’ poetry to appear in English.⁶ Colette, by contrast, has a museum of her own and a “Société des amis de Colette,” which publishes a journal and regularly organizes scholarly conferences devoted to the study of her work. She is the subject of more than one feature-length film, including a recent TV mini-series, and over the past few years, several new biographies have appeared.⁷ Since 2004 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Colette’s death, Colette is being celebrated all around France. The impressive slate of commemorative activities includes a number of exhibits, concerts, theatrical presentations, guided tours, colloquia, and even a special “Menu Colette” at selected restaurants, in addition to several new books and editions of her work.⁸ Of the women writers of her generation, Colette alone has been singled out by the foremost feminist intellectuals of our day. Hélène Cixous identified her as one of only three French authors whose writing qualified as “écriture féminine” in her influential 1975 essay “Le Rire de la Méduse.” More recently, Julia Kristeva added a volume on Colette to her *Génie féminin* trilogy.

Cocteau brought Noailles and Colette together in his 1955 speech, but as members of the Belgian Academy, they had each already taken their own turn at the podium to address their fellow writers *as writers*. Noailles became a member of the Académie Royale de langue et littérature françaises de Belgique

in 1922, and Colette followed her in 1936. Their respective reception speeches represent one “mise en scène de la femme-écrivain” that had Colette, the seasoned performer, uncharacteristically suffering from stage fright. Maurice Goudekot records her anxiety in *Près de Colette*, and she also expressed her fear in a letter to her good friend and fellow writer Hélène Picard: “je pense déjà...avec une peur verdâtre à la séance, au discours de réception” (qtd. in *Oeuvres* 3: 1811). Claude Pichois even suggests that Colette may have feigned a knee injury to have the reception date postponed a month (*Oeuvres* 3: 1811). She claimed that she was uncomfortable with the type of overt praise her reception to the academy would entail, but another explanation lies in her discomfort with the role of “écrivain,” which the reception was forcing her to acknowledge and play out. In fact, Colette opens her speech by expressing her surprise at finding herself a writer: “Je suis devenue écrivain sans m’en percevoir...je m’étonnerais encore que l’on m’appelât écrivain, qu’un éditeur et un public me traitassent en écrivain” (3: 1079).

With more than twenty novels to her credit at this point in her career, not to mention numerous short stories and journal articles, the sixty-three year-old Colette continued to express her famous ambivalence about the career that she characterized as being forced on her, an accident of fate that became a habit over the years due to economic necessity. She was still struggling to come to terms with the writing career she claims she never chose, a profession that she regularly characterizes in her correspondence as a sort of drudgery as she misses out on the joys of life in order to meet yet another deadline. Writing again to Hélène Picard, for example, she complains about making little headway on her latest book and adds “Avec quelle joie je m’y résignerais, si...j’avais de quoi vivre. Vivre sans écrire, ô merveille!” (*Lettres* 164. Ellipsis in original).

For her reception at the Belgian Academy, Colette was faced with addressing an elite literary audience on the customary topic of her predecessor. Colette, however, avoids directly addressing the topic at hand—literature—by putting a different spin on her role. She politely sidesteps any discussion of

Noailles’s work by claiming it would be impertinent for her to critique Noailles’s poetry, which she likens to “une parcelle merveilleuse du sensible univers, comme le bloc d’ambre préserve une aile éternelle de mouche, ou la délicate arborescence qui suggère la forêt inconnue” (*Oeuvres* 3: 1083). Colette concentrates instead on the woman she knew by casting herself not in the role of “écrivain,” but in the role of “peintre.” The intention of the rough sketch she draws, “respectueux à la fois du modèle et de la vérité” (3: 1083) is to reveal a candid portrait of the woman she admired and whose friendship she cherished. But this portrait also provides Colette the opportunity to distinguish her writing from Noailles’s with regard to nature.

Colette first gives her audience a brief history of her friendship with Noailles, insisting that it was the countess who first sought her out and not the other way around. Their letters to each other, the only complete correspondence we have of Colette’s, record a friendship built on mutual respect and admiration. Their friendship appears to have been genuine despite the differences, some of them more imagined than real, separating them by social class and temperament. Colette’s speech makes it clear that the delicate, aristocratic, and sickly comtesse de Noailles, who rarely left her bed near the end of her life, was attracted to the robust bon-vivant provincial she found in Colette, and Colette plays up this difference, contrasting the tiny white hands of the frail countess—an image which appears numerous times in her letters to and articles about Noailles—with her own hands, tan and strong from her active outdoor life:

Quand, je revenais d’un été de campagne, hâlée, ayant travaillé au jardin, bêché, écaillé ma peau au soleil, à la mer et même au fourneau, je m’amusais à prendre dans ma main une des mains d’Anna de Noailles. Ses doigts et sa paume brillaient au creux de ma main comme la chair blanche d’une noix dans son écale sèche. (*Oeuvres* 3: 1091)

She conjures up a picture of a more youthful Noailles, “l’enfant princier dont la languissante

anorexie refuse les mets délicats et qui convoite la tranche de gros pain, tartiné de fromage blanc et d'oignon cru, mordue à belles dents par le fils du jardinier" (3 : 1087). This image leads her to contemplate the much-discussed love of nature the two writers presumably shared.

But Colette's characterization of the young princesse de Brancovan as an anorexic child craving the simple rustic food she is denied, is loaded with intertextual references from both writers.⁹ We can easily identify Colette herself with the "fils du jardinier." She was Sido's daughter, after all, and wrote proudly of her mother's astounding green thumb. "Madame Colette," the narrator of *Le Pur et l'impur*, possesses what she calls a "véridique hermaphrodisme mental" and describes herself as having "une courte et dure main de jardinier, qui écrivait" (*Oeuvres* 3: 589). As an old woman, confined to bed herself, Colette chose to represent herself to the public through the striking image of herself biting into a raw onion in the 1951 film she narrated and helped write.¹⁰

The earthy Colette, known for her aversion to hosiery, shoes, earrings, and hats (who even went stockingless and be-sandaled to her reception at the Belgian Academy, much to the chagrin of the conservative Belgian public), presents quite a contrast to the diminutive countess who appeared regularly in public weighed down by countless accessories—long strings of pearls, oddly shaped hats with ribbons and feathers, gloves, scarves, and fashionable shoes. This is exactly as Cocteau portrays them in his "Portraits-souvenir" originally published in the *Figaro* and illustrated by his witty sketches. Describing Parisian personalities (many of them writers) that he sees about town, Cocteau presents them to his readers as though they are in the act of performing a number for their own readers. Noailles, for example, was known for her brilliant monologues that had the awestruck servants crowding in the doorways to hear her speak.

La beauté de cette petite personne, la grâce de son timbre de voix au service d'une extraordinaire drôlerie descriptive, l'em-

portèrent sur le reste et je compris, une fois pour toutes, que ses reniflements, ses renversements, ses croisements de jambes, ses haltes, ses petites mains ouvertes, projetées d'elle comme d'une fronde, ses gestes jonchant le sol de voiles, d'écharpes, de colliers, de chapelets arabes, de manchons, de mouchoirs, de parapluies Tom-pouce, de ceintures et d'épingles doubles, constituaient sa mise en scène, son mécanisme et, en quelque sorte, les accessoires de son numéro. (*Portraits souvenir* 209-210)

As for Colette, Cocteau tells of seeing her with her husband, Willy, and Polaire, the actress who played Claudine on stage, at the Ice Palace in those days when Willy dressed them up as twins as part of his plan to promote the Claudine books and play. This, according to Cocteau, was an earlier manifestation of Colette: "Pas cette solide Colette qui nous offre de succulentes salades à l'oignon cru et fait son marché en sandales à l'étalage de Hédiard...une Colette mince, mince; une espèce de petit renard en costume cycliste, de fox-terrier en jupes, avec, sur l'œil une tache noire, retroussée à la tempe par un nœud de faveur rouge" (*Portraits souvenir* 88).

The delicate princess stands in stark contrast to the solid bon vivant peasant, and colors their respective appreciation of nature, a major theme in their work. The anorexic child Colette evokes in her speech resonates with a similar image found in the preface to Noailles's *Poèmes d'enfance*, a key text in which the countess explains the important role nature played in her formation as a poet. As a young girl, the hypersensitive poet in the making was so overcome by the multitude of sensations inspired by her contact with nature on the family country estate, that she resolved to note every detail "de telle sorte qu'une vivante image enjaillît" (146). She would fill notebook after notebook with her impressions, and among them we find descriptions of the walks she would take where she would observe "les mûres violettes et noires, objets de notre convoitise, protégées dans les haies par leurs épines dures et croisées et que l'on nous affirmait être réservés aux petits

vagabonds, aux enfants pauvres,—chers enfants pauvres, sans gouvernante, sans vêtements nets ou pimpants, et que nous avons tant enviés!” (148). The “vagabonds” and “enfants pauvres” that Noailles envies could easily include the young Colette, who wandered freely in the countryside surrounding her home regardless of clean clothes or prickly thorns.

Noailles describes herself in her memoirs and in interviews as an inspired writer who felt destined to become a poet from a very early age. She told Jean Larnac that she began celebrating nature in verse at age fifteen. “Le jour où j’ai pu chanter la nature, j’ai savouré toute la joie d’une délivrance. C’était un vase trop plein qui s’épanchait. Il fallait que j’écrive; écrire était pour moi un acte aussi naturel que rire, pleurer, dormir” (Larnac, *Comtesse de Noailles* 59). Noailles’s declaration is at odds with Colette’s famous statement in *Journal à rebours* about having never wanted to write, and her claim that instead of springing from it, she feared writing would tarnish the special relationship she enjoyed with the material world:

Mais dans ma jeunesse, je n’ai jamais, jamais désiré écrire....Aucune voix n’emprunta le son du vent pour me glisser avec un petit souffle froid, dans l’oreille, le conseil d’écrire, et d’écrire encore, de ternir, en écrivant, ma bondissante ou tranquille perception de l’univers vivant. (*Oeuvres* 4: 174-75)

Colette, as the freedom-loving child of nature, is just one manifestation of the earthy “peasant” role she frequently stages in her autobiographical texts. In fact, Colette’s recreation of herself as a country girl probably dates from 1904, the same year she began her friendship with Noailles by sending her a dedicated copy of *Les Dialogues de bêtes*. As the first book signed “Colette Willy,” this was a crucial work during a critical period in Colette’s career where she was trying to break with Willy and make a name for herself as a writer. Success depended on separating herself from the Colette of the Claudine years, that free-spirited bohemian who attended salons and concerts with the debauched and debonair Willy.

This is what Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier argue in their provocative biography of Colette. Though simply titled *Colette* in the French version, the first volume of the English version bears the aptly expanded title *Creating Colette: From Ingénue to Libertine (1873-1913)*. Referring to Colette as a genius of self-promotion, Francis and Gontier explain how Colette went from “high-society corrupt darling to rustic madonna” in part by writing *Les Dialogues de bêtes*, and most importantly, by convincing Francis Jammes to write a preface for it. Jammes, whom Colette had never met, was a Catholic writer known for his sympathetic portraits of animals. In a correspondence that Francis and Gontier describe as “an exercise in seduction and bargaining,” Colette convinced Jammes to write the preface for an expanded version of *Les Dialogues de bêtes*. Jammes, however, chose to portray the author in his preface as completely the opposite of her notorious Claudine image. The result, according to Francis and Gontier, is that “this astoundingly misleading preface created an image of Colette as a peasant girl, which in time superseded all others” (210). *Les Dialogues de bêtes* was followed by *Les Vrilles de la vigne* in 1908, whose short vignettes were compared to naturalist sketches popularized by Jules Renard. In fact, Colette inscribed a copy of *Les Vrilles de la vigne* for Renard with these words: “Pour Jules Renard/ souvenir d’une admiratrice paysanne” (Qtd. by Mercier in *Oeuvres* 1: 1531).

Francis and Gontier may or may not be correct in tracing Colette’s peasant persona to Jammes’s preface, especially considering that Colette was debuting on the music hall stage around the same time. We do know that she turned her writing to more naturalistic subjects during a period when Noailles had already firmly established herself as the major poet of nature. By the time Colette published *Les Vrilles de la vigne*, Noailles had already published three novels and three collections of poetry including her best-selling first volume *Le Coeur innombrable* (1901), which contains her well-known poem “L’Offrande à la nature.” Catherine Perry argues that Noailles designed this poem to establish her originality as *the* poet of nature, and “to

prevent any other poet from trespassing on her privileged territory" (*Persephone Unbound* 109). According to Perry, Noailles chose nature as her "true site of election" because "it grants her the possibility of constructing a poetic identity unhampered by restrictive concepts of nation, ethnicity, or propriety" (111). Perry's reading of the nature trope as it evolved in Noailles's work demonstrates that while she seemed to accept the traditional association of the feminine with nature and the "natural," Noailles was actually intent on challenging and transgressing the significance of these terms (115). Colette, of course, was far from seeing Noailles in these terms since she was bent on playing the peasant to Noailles's princess. Her reception speech leaves little doubt that by the time Colette joined the Belgian Academy in 1936, she realized it was in her best interest to distinguish her claim to the animal and vegetable kingdom from that ruled over by the aristocratic Noailles. Nature was seen as a common point of interest between the two writers, a misconception that Colette tries to set straight in her "Discours de réception." She prefaces her comments by stating "on a supposé, on a démontré qu'un sentiment vif et païen de la nature nous avait rassemblées. Mon Dieu, je le veux bien. Mais je me permets d'assurer que ni Mme de Noailles ni moi nous ne nous fussions contentées de similitudes." She continues, "Je fus prompte à voir combien mon expérience et ma mémoire des choses agrestes pâlissaient devant son improvisation. Ce que j'avais appris de la Nature, la fragile enfant du jardin bien ordonné d'Amphion l'inventait puissamment" (*Œuvres* 3: 1087).

She is referring, of course, to the Brancovan family estate mentioned earlier where Noailles spent her childhood summers. Located on Lake Léman near Evian, bordered by property owned by the Rothchilds, the villa, gardens and family yacht are lovingly evoked in Noailles's memoirs and the preface to *Poèmes d'enfance*. We have already noted the importance of her early experiences with nature at Amphion. In fact, she claimed that she owed everything to the garden at Amphion, and it was there, appropriately enough, that her friends erected a

memorial to "La Muse du jardin" after her death in 1933. Gardens abound in Noailles's poetry, which overflows with references to flowers, vegetables, fruit, and honey bees. "L'abeille" became the preferred image of herself as poet as she claimed to gather nectar from nature's abundant gardens in order to create her poetry. But contemporary critics also ridiculed Noailles as "La Muse potagère" for her poetic references to and identification with such unpoetic plants as grass, green beans, cabbage, and rhubarb. Rosa Galli-Pellegrini's recent evaluation of Noailles's garden imagery, however, views the poet's relationship to gardens in a new light. She praises Noailles for her "reveries végétales" and sees Noailles's sensory exploration of humble gardens as having equal validity in her poetic universe as eroticism, joy, and meditations on man's immortality and "l'essence cosmique." Galli-Pellegrini calls Noailles's relationship to nature "un ensemble complexe, une tendance au syncrétisme où l'être et la nature agissent l'un sur l'autre, et sur plusieurs plans, à la fois sensorial, émotif et intellectuel" (226).

The humble garden is not one that Colette pictured Noailles cultivating, nor was it to her advantage to have her readers picture the countess that way. She painted the garden at Amphion as distinctly different from the one Sido so lovingly tended in Colette's youth, and her mention of it in her reception speech is an obvious means of contrasting her more humble origins with Noailles's noble birth. But there are further implications for their writing in this statement, which Colette clarifies in her "Discours de réception" by describing an impromptu visit from Noailles to her garden at Auteuil.

La première fois qu'elle y vint, je lui mis dans la main une poignée de verdure froissée, dont le parfum de citronnelle adoucie et de géranium la ravit, l'étonna. Elle demanda le nom de l'herbe merveilleuse, de la plante unique et rare, venue pour moi seule d'un Orient de jardins, de terrasses et de cascades...

"Mais, lui dis-je, c'est tout simplement la mélisse des abeilles.

—De la mélisse, s'écria Mme de Noailles, de la mélisse ! Enfin, je connais donc cette mélisse dont j'ai tant parlé!" (*Oeuvres* 3: 1089; Ellipsis in original)

Noailles's reaction in this strategically chosen "sound bite" nicely illustrates the point Colette is trying to make here. Although Noailles's earliest goal as a writer, similar to that expressed by Colette, was to paint an exact picture of nature, Colette implies that her own experience of the natural world is clearly grounded in real contact with living things, whereas Noailles's is mediated by a poetic imagination. In fact, despite her fondness for vegetable gardens, Noailles openly states that her intention is to embellish reality, to heighten and enhance experience through her hypersensitive nature and the music and imagery of her verse: "C'est du moi que monte et que s'élance / Un univers plus beau; plus plein de passions" (*Les Éblouissements*, 183).

For Colette, Noailles must have seemed guilty of a bad case of overacting. Imagination, if we can believe the advice Colette gave to Renée Hamon, "c'est la perte du reporter." She advises Hamon to remain faithful to her first impressions when writing, to avoid lying, and to fear "les guirlandes" and "l'indiscrète poésie" (*Lettres* 19). Although Colette is vague about how to write good prose, and she almost never gave advice or discussed her methods of working, she does enumerate what one should not put into prose, and "l'indiscrète poésie" falls into that category. The difference between poetry and prose was another point she felt compelled to make, and in her 1937 lecture "La poésie que j'aime," she targets the type of spontaneous and inspired writing associated with Noailles. Colette opens her lecture by calling herself a sort of monster, "un prosateur qui n'a jamais écrit de vers" (577). She is as adamant here about never writing poetry, as she is in her insistence that she never wanted to write at all. Colette qualifies her resistance to verse forms by explaining that it required strict diligence on her part not to let an alexandrine slip into her prose for fear of becoming "un mauvais poète déchaîné" (581).

This is presumably what she felt about Noailles's

undisciplined verse, and to illustrate her point, she refers to a conversation with Noailles in which she asks her friend if she intends to write more novels. Noailles replies "Jamais! Pourquoi me servais-je d'un langage où je ne pourrais pas tout dire?" (582). Colette describes Noailles's reaction as an "hommage rendu à la liberté du poème, à ses immunités multiples, au noble usage qu'il a le droit de faire de toutes licences" (582). Noailles's "licences" were richly commented on by her critics who enumerated mistakes in her poems. Although Noailles pretended that such criticism did not bother her, she apologizes for errors found in her collections of her poetry in two separate letters to Colette.

C'est à ce poète perpétuel que vous êtes, et à votre don naturel de la perfection, que je tiens à signaler la misère des erreurs typographiques de mon livre; le murmure de la poésie empêche que l'on corrige ses épreuves. (*Lettres à ses pairs* 70)

Colette found the word "inspiration" to be among the most suspect of the French language, but for Noailles, it was more than an excuse for poor editing; it was a major theme in her writing that makes its way into her 1922 "Dis.cours de reception" where she begs her distinguished audience to forgive her for the liberties she has taken with the French language. She freely admits that "[elle] a parfois déchiré d'une aile imprudente le tissu parfait du langage." She hopes the Academy will allow her this privilege "parce que vous ne refusez pas aux abeilles le droit de se mouvoir, et de plonger au cœur des fleurs, qu'elles distendent, pour vous en apporter le baume et le secret" (184). For her, poetry is the opposite of constraint; hence her refusal to comply with the restrictive rules of fixed poetic forms.¹¹

Unlike Colette, Noailles was always willing to talk about her methods of working. In numerous interviews and texts she describes her inspired method of writing that effectively reduced the act of composing a poem to a sort of passive trance-like state. For example, she told Jean Larnac: "Je ne comprends pas que l'on doive peiner pour écrire des vers. Pour moi, jamais je ne rature. L'œuvre jail-

lit, toute prête. Je n'ai qu'à l'écrire" (*Comtesse de Noailles* 160-61). In an interview with Joseph Galtier she explained "Lors que je prends la plume, comme par la volonté d'une puissance supérieure et dominatrice, il semble que cette puissance me dicte. L'œuvre finie me paraître sortie d'une main étrangère. Je suis ainsi mon premier lecteur" (n.pag.).

It is difficult to say whether we should take Anna de Noailles at her word here, but in any case, Colette clearly sought to separate herself from the model of the inspired woman poet represented by Anna de Noailles. Not only did she want her readers to understand that for her writing was a difficult craft that she worked hard to perfect, but she was also promoting her "peasant" persona whose earthy relationship with nature is quite different from that envisioned by the typical reader of "la littérature féminine." Playing out her role as a woman writer, Colette did not want her interpretation of the part confused with the overdramatic stock character she saw Noailles playing as the nature poet. The Decadent novelist and literary critic Rachilde was among the first of Colette's readers to signal her originality in the reviews of the Claudine series she wrote for *Le Mercure de France*. She recognized that although the novels were signed by Willy, Claudine could only have been created by a woman. Rachilde identifies the source of Claudine's startling new voice as "natural paganism," and, adding her own twist to the idea of nature as a room of one's own that is outside the influence of men, she describes Colette's prose as coming from the depths "des forêts antiques où la jeune druidesse vierge s'offrait sauvagement aux embrassements du Dieu avant même avoir connu l'homme" (751).¹²

Rachilde's striking image reinforces the idea that Colette preferred to lead her readers down a garden path whose twists and turns are difficult to anticipate since they do not conform to the tamer and more romantic notions of nature that readers came to expect from a woman writer. Colette's strategy of moving in and out of preconceived categories is consistent throughout her work and has resulted in a series of often contradictory myths including

"Colette as peasant" under discussion here. Colette, according to Elaine Marks, confuses her readers "By refusing to abide by the rules that govern the production of accepted and expected meanings" (Eisinger and McCarthy x). Colette's gardens, as well as the houses that figure in her novels, illustrate this strategy since, as Paul d'Hollander points out, they are frequently depicted in a state of abandon:

tous deux doivent se soumettre au même rythme de vie naturelle et à demi sauvage...la vie, la terre, les bêtes et l'amour n'obéissent guère aux lois, aux conventions que les humains ont multipliées à plaisir. (66)

It is precisely the unconventionality of nature à la Colette that she draws out in her mise-en-scène de la femme écrivain by comparing herself with Noailles. Anticipating the problems of reductive labeling, Colette staged scenes of herself as a writer that rely on a sustained contrast with Noailles. She allows her public brief glimpses of Colette the writer by highlighting the differences that distinguish her from her predecessor in the Belgian Academy. By promoting her peasant persona in contrast to (and at the expense of) Noailles's more aristocratic princess image, she invited a fresh understanding of what it meant to write as a woman by making her readers question the gender stereotypes they applied to reading women's work. Noailles was clearly a victim of such stereotyped reading as she became the typecast "feminine" writer of her generation.¹³

Marie-Odile André's analysis of Colette versus Noailles situates their relationship specifically in the context of a rivalry dictated by the critical discourses of the 1920s and 30s:

Au fur et à mesure que s'établit sa réputation littéraire et que son nom s'impose au premier rang, avec celui d'Anna de Noailles, au fur et à mesure aussi qu'elle travaille son image publique d'écrivain, se fait jour dans ses écrits et ses propos une volonté de construire entre elle et Anna de Noailles un jeu d'antithèses qui lui permette de revendi-

quer sa propre place. (107)

Noting that Colette's "Discours de réception" provided the opportunity "de dessiner une double image publique, d'elle-même et d'Anna de Noailles, qui fixe leurs places respectives dans le champ littéraire" (107), André comes to a conclusion that echoes my own when she affirms that "Colette utilise donc la confrontation obligée avec Anna de Noailles pour mieux affirmer sa spécificité" (111). Writing in *Cahiers Colette* for an audience of confirmed Colettophiles, André is comfortable in asserting that Colette has permanently replaced her rival, due, in part, to her successful staging of their differences. Recent feminist critics, however, have made the case that Noailles's treatment of nature was really quite unconventional; something that Colette's agenda and her own gender bias prevented her from appreciating. As I indicated earlier, Catherine Perry is at the forefront of Noailles scholars who argue that although Noailles identified with nature in a way that seemed to reinforce stereotypes of the feminine as natural, that is primitive, spontaneous, and inspired, a closer reading reveals that she was challenging those assumptions. Perry sees Nature as representing a dynamic space for freedom that Noailles was able to transform, recasting, for example, the Nature-as-woman paradigm with Nature as a male lover whom the woman actively embraces. Moreover, Perry asserts that Noailles's interpretation of Nature "is distinguished from its earlier, Romantic and post-Romantic, treatments by the sharp sensations, the Dionysian intensity, the rapturous, exuberant, and playful eroticism, even the violence, with which her lyric self apprehends it" (*Persephone Unbound* 25).¹⁴

Gayle Levy reads Noailles's relationship with nature in a different way. By arguing that Noailles's poetic universe sprang from her imagination more than from lived experience of the natural world, Levy places Noailles in the context of nineteenth-century notions of genius to conclude that she was "performing and not simply theorizing genius" (126-27). Other critics have taken a new look at the "romantic" qualities of Noailles's poetry that was clearly

influenced by Victor Hugo and other Romantic poets she admired. In "Passion, Power, Will, Desire: Gender Trespassing in the Poetry of Anna de Noailles," Mari H. O'Brien examines the persona adopted by Noailles to suggest that the egocentric, active and empowered position from which the poet speaks is an encroachment on male gendered territory. Relating Noailles's stance to that spelled out by Wordsworth in his preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, O'Brien argues that Noailles's verse shows her to be carrying out the "programme recommended by Wordsworth," who authorizes the poet to "celebrate his own passions, volitions, and life spirit and those of the 'visible universe' around him, to wit, nature" (101). O'Brien's notion that Noailles's poetic "cross-dressing" may have alienated her male critics, thus accounting for much of the neglect and stereotyping of her poetry, is a provocative yet compelling conclusion, especially since Noailles's poetry is typically seen as representative of "feminine" sensibilities.

These revisionist readings of Anna de Noailles's poetry not only suggest that we should reexamine her work as a whole, but they also point to the weakness of Colette's interpretation. As a reader she falls straight into all the same gender traps that biased the critics against feminine literature—the very traps she wanted her own readers to avoid! Modern-day readers, whose consciousness has been raised about the dangers of such reductionist readings, can nevertheless put Colette's peasant persona in context to appreciate how Colette constantly reinvented herself until she at last became that grand lady of French letters affectionately referred to as "Notre Colette." The array of festivities taking place this year to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of her death remind us that readers are still ready and willing to follow Colette down her garden path, no matter where it might lead.

Notes

¹ Rambach's book *Colette Pure et Impure: Bataille pour la postérité d'un écrivain*, provides an excellent overview of Colette's critical reception. The author points out how the grammar and spelling manuals used in the French school system have helped perpetuate Colette's reputation as a nature writer since they inevitably use examples and excerpts from her work

"qui, presque invariablement, sont des descriptions d'animaux ou le récit des courses de Claudine dans les bois de Saint-Sauveur en Puisaye" (25). Dictionaries and encyclopedias, such as the 1998 *Larousse*, also contribute to this image when they define Colette as "femme de lettres : peintre de l'âme féminine et de la nature familière" (qtd. in Rambach 28).

² Early twentieth-century works of literary criticism that promoted this view include Jules Bertaut's *La littérature féminine d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Librairie des annales, 1909), Paul Flat's *Nos femmes de lettres* (Paris: Perrin et Cie, 1909), Jean de Gourmont's *Muses d'aujourd'hui: Essai de physiologie poétique* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1910), and Julien Benda's *Belphegor: Essai sur l'esthétique de la présente société française* (Paris: Emile-Paul Frères, 1919).

³ Barbara Johnson makes a similar point about Marceline Debordes-Valmore, another nature poet, when she argues 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" (emphasis in original, 166, 170). See her "Gender and Poetry : Charles Baudelaire and Marceline Debordes-Valmore," in *Displacements : Women, Tradition, Literatures in French*, eds. Joan DeJean and Nancy K. Miller (Baltimore : Johns Hopkins UP, 1991), 163-181. A case in point is Domna Stanton's bilingual anthology, *The Defiant Muse: French Feminist Poems from the Middle Ages to the Present* (NY: Feminist Press, 1986). Stanton excludes both Debordes-Valmore and Anna de Noailles from her book because their overly feminine work does not meet the feminist criteria she establishes.

⁴ The notion of "la mise-en-scène de la femme écrivain" was first suggested to me by Christine Planté who organized a session with that title for the Twentieth-Century French Studies Conference where a version of this article was first presented.

⁵ The poll for "Princesse de lettres" was conducted by the journal *Eva*, which recorded 2,397 votes for Noailles, who narrowly defeated Colette with 2,363 votes. According to Claude Pichois, the 1910 poll ranking the three women who most merited election to the Académie Française was conducted by the editor of *L'Intransigeant* with these results: Gérard d'Houville (penname of Marie de Régner, daughter of José-Maria de Heredia) was first, Anna de Noailles was second, and Colette came in third (*Oeuvres*, 3: 1810).

⁶ For a list of recent publications on Anna de Noailles's Life and Work (1980 to the present), see the bibliography compiled by Catherine Perry on her Web site at <http://www.nd.edu/~cperry>. Perry's new book, *Persephone Unbound. Dionysian Aesthetics in the Works of Anna de Noailles* (2003), also includes an overview of Noailles's critical reception. Since none of Noailles's

poetry has been translated into English, with the exception of a few poems, Perry's book will also serve to introduce Noailles to an English-speaking audience. Nearly all of Colette's work is available in English translation. The greater accessibility of her writing has certainly contributed to her popularity in comparison to Noailles, whose books are out of print, and only available in the original French. One exception is Noailles's novel, *Le visage émerveillé*, which was reissued in 2004.

⁷ Danny Huston directed the film *Becoming Colette* in 1992 with Klaus Maria Brandauer as Willy and Mathilda May as Colette. Recent biographies of Colette include Claude Francis and Fernande Gontier's *Colette* (Paris: Perrin, 1997), Michel Del Castillo's *Colette, Une Certaine France* (Paris: Stock, 1999), Judith Thurman's *Secrets of the Flesh: A Life of Colette* (NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), and Claude Pichois and Alan Brunet's *Colette* (Paris: Editions de Fallois, 1999). The TV mini-series, "Colette, une femme libre," written by Nadine and Marie Trintignant, which Nadine directed with her daughter Marie playing the role of Colette, was aired on France 2 in April, 2004. Since Marie died shortly before the film's completion, the TV movie was given a lot of media attention. She suffered a cerebral hemorrhage following a beating by her boyfriend, Bertrand Cantat. Cantat, the lead singer for the rock group "Noir Désir," has been sentenced to eight years in prison for her murder.

⁸ See the Web site at <<http://www.colette.org>> for information on the Musée Colette at Saint Sauveur en-Puisaye, "La Société des amis de Colette," *Cahiers Colette* (the official publication of that Society), and the Colette research center. This Web site also has a calendar of events for the fiftieth anniversary of Colette's death including the November 2004 colloquium organized by "La Société des amis de Colette" on the topic "Colette: Mythes et images"

⁹ Anna de Noailles was born Anna Elisabeth de Brancovan in Paris on November 15, 1876. She held the title of princess since her father was a Romanian prince, Prince Grégoire Bibesco de Brancovan. Her mother was a Musurus, a concert pianist from one of the oldest and most distinguished Greek families. In 1897 Anna married into the French aristocracy when she became the wife of comte Mathieu de Noailles. Three years later the countess gave birth to the couple's only child, a son. The following year she launched her career by publishing *Le Coeur innombrable*, which was an immediate and astounding success.

¹⁰ This documentary film on Colette was commissioned by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who choose Yannick Bellon to make it. According to Lezlie Hart Stivale, the 77 year-old Colette played an active role in the film's production. She wrote long segments of the film script herself, provided the narrative voice for the film's central monologue, and played herself in the opening and closing scenes. See Stivale's "Colette and Autobiography: The Film Version," *Women in French Studies* Vol. 2 (Fall 1994): 67-77.

¹¹ Although the content of Noailles' poetry was often innovative, her versification was rather traditional. She was adamantly opposed to free verse, for example, and firmly believed that French poetry depended on patterns of rhyme and rhythm.

¹² For more on Rachilde's reading of Colette, see Tama Lea Engelking "Fin de siècle Critical Cross-Dressing," *CEA Critic*. (Special Issue on Cross-Gender Writing) 56.1 (Fall 1993): 45-52.

¹³ Colette's strategy of opposing herself to another woman writer is not limited to Anna de Noailles. She uses a similar tactic with the poet Renée Vivien in *Le pur et l'impur* by portraying Vivien in the most negative light possible as a debauched decadent writer. In contrast, Colette emerges on the "pure" side of the pure/impure pairing. See Tama Lea Engelking, "'A la recherche de la pureté': Colette on Women Writers," *Atlantis: Women's Studies Journal* 26.1 (Fall/Winter 2001): 3-12.

¹⁴ Perry develops these ideas further in *Persephone Unbound*. See especially Chapter 2, "Nature Renatured and the Issue of Gender," 108-164.

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