

## UNIT 23

# Gender and literature: women writers

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In an important essay 'Towards a Feminist Poetics' (1979) Elaine Showalter (1986, pp. 125–43) distinguished two varieties of feminist criticism. The first of these she labelled 'the feminist critique'. This is a form of critical enquiry concerned with woman as the consumer of literature and with the stereotypes of women purveyed in male-authored texts. Its most famous exemplar is probably Kate Millet's bestselling *Sexual Politics* (1971). For her second branch of feminist criticism Showalter coined the term *Gynocriticism*. This foregrounds the study of women as producers of literature and aims to recover the lost or submerged history of women's writing, as well as to offer a theory or explanatory model for the themes, tropes and genres which women writers have practised through history.

Why should such a critical practice as Gynocriticism be necessary? One way of answering this would be to turn to the evidence of the curricula of university English courses, and to the activities of anthologists, literary historians and theorists of literature. The feminist writer Dale Spender, recalling her own undergraduate literary studies, notes,

in the guise of presenting me with an overview of the literary heritage of the English-speaking world, my education provided me with a grossly inaccurate and distorted view of the history of letters. For my introduction to the 'greats' was (with the exception of the famous five women novelists) an introduction to the great men. ('Women and Literary History', Belsey and Moore, 1989, pp. 21–33)

The American writer and critic Tilly Olsen surveying the content of twentieth-century literature courses in 223 undergraduate programmes between 1971 and 1976 found that women authors accounted for only 6 per cent of the texts prescribed (1980, pp. 186–93). Prestigious anthologies provide evidence of the same pronounced bias against women authors. The *Oxford Anthology of English Poetry* (1986), edited by John Wain, claims to offer a 'representative sample of the main course of English poetry': it contains work by fourteen women poets as against 207 men.

As Spender and others have noted, literary historians and theorists collude in this silencing of women's voices. Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* (1987) is still a widely recommended text on undergraduate courses on the novel. Despite his passing observation that 'the majority of eighteenth century novels were actually written by

women', Watt maintains that this phenomenon constituted a 'purely quantitative assertion of dominance' (p. 339). Thus Watt's account of the origins of the English novel recognizes only the paternity of the genre in detailed analyses of the work of Defoe, Richardson and Fielding, while his definition of the novel in terms of formal realism not only ignores the earlier work of Aphra Behn but also dismisses as 'fugitive literary tendencies' the Gothic and sentimental fiction, two modes consistently employed by women novelists. This straitjacketing of the novel within the requirement of formal realism works not only to suppress the influence of early women writers like Behn, Burney and Radcliffe, but also to downgrade or marginalize later women novelists like Charlotte Brontë, whose fictions characteristically mingle romance and realism.

The same male bias has characterized literary theory. Where Ian Watt sees the history of the novel solely in terms of a paternal line, Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) draws on Freud's Oedipal theory for an ambitious overview of literary history, which appears to him as the struggle of successive generations of sons/authors to combat the influence of strong, literary fathers. Just as Freud's original formulation of the Oedipus complex ignored the mother, so Bloom's appropriation of it for literature leaves no space for women. His literary genealogy is exclusively male, making room for women solely as the (silent) muse of the male poet.

Confronted with the evidence of women's exclusion from the literary canon and from literary history the male-dominated literary establishment has tended to defend itself by arguing that aesthetic criteria are in themselves free of gender bias and based on universal values. Feminist critics, on the other hand, will argue that no literary judgement is neutral, that the category 'literature' or even 'great literature' is culturally determined. If, as has been the case, the male perspective has dominated the cultural establishment, then male-authored texts will inevitably dominate the literary canon. So pervasive has this situation been that literary judgements and aesthetic criteria which are culturally determined come to seem 'natural' and 'universal'. As Virginia Woolf remarked,

It is the masculine values that prevail ... This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room. A scene in a battle-field is more important than a scene in a shop – everywhere and much more subtly the difference of value persists. (*A Room of One's Own*, 1993, p. 67)

Woolf suggests another reason why it is crucial to rediscover and to re-evaluate women's writing. While we often unthinkingly assume that literature is a reflection of life, it is as true to say that it is a product of other literature. Musing upon 'the effect of tradition and of the lack of tradition upon the mind of the writer' Woolf concludes that when the early nineteenth-century women novelists came to write 'they had no tradition behind them, or one so short and partial that it was of little help. For we think back through our mothers if we are women' (1993, p. 69). If this lack of a continuous, visible and valued tradition of women's writing may be argued to impede women in the sphere of novel writing – where women's literary

achievement has been most evident – how much more of an impediment must this lack of tradition be to women poets. In their volume of essays on British and American women poets, *Shakespeare's Sisters* (1979), the critics Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar cite Elizabeth Barrett Browning's complaint in 1845: 'England has had many learned women ... and yet where are the poetesses? ... I look everywhere for grandmothers and see none' (p. 65). One powerful argument then for recovering the tradition of women's writing is that it works to empower women authors in our own time.

This recovery and reassessment of forgotten texts has continued since the 1970s. Unsurprisingly it was to the women writers of the Victorian period that feminist critics first turned. Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977) uncovers a distinct women's tradition by placing the work of the major women novelists in the context of lesser-known women writers of their time. Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* (1978) revealed the ways by which women writers influenced one another, demonstrating, for example, the extensive influence of the French novelist Madame de Staël upon many British and American women writers of the nineteenth century, and echoes of Elizabeth Barrett Browning in the poetry of Emily Dickinson. Before long interest turned to the earlier periods of literary history. Dale Spender in her *Mothers of the Novel* (1986) argued for the significance of those seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women novelists so cavalierly dismissed by Ian Watt. More recently still feminist critics have focused their attentions on the author who has the distinction of being known as the first professional woman writer in English, Aphra Behn. One very positive result of this interest has been the flood of anthologies of earlier women poets and dramatists and reprints of well nigh forgotten women novelists. The foremothers whom Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Barrett Browning sought are now readily available to readers.

Other aspects of Gynocriticism remain more controversial and problematic. If, for example, the tradition of woman's writing is now more visible, the question remains, how should that newly discovered tradition relate to 'the Great Tradition' – the male-dominated canon of great works studied in university literature courses. To have available an option on Victorian Woman Writers on an English Literature course which previously found no room for Charlotte or Anne Brontë, Christina Rossetti or Elizabeth Gaskell may seem an advance, but it is less an advance when put beside the fact that the compulsory course on Victorian Literature which those same students take is dominated by the traditional male greats, and finds room only for the usual 'special case' women writers Emily Brontë and George Eliot. Paradoxically, in trying to open up the canon by arguing for the inclusion of courses on women writers we may be in danger of perpetuating the marginalizing of women's writing of which feminists complain. Alternatively, we may argue for an emphasis on literature by women within interdisciplinary Women's Studies courses, but this too runs the risk of ghettoizing the woman writer. Both these strategies, necessary as they have been, have tended to leave unchallenged the notion that literature at its most significant and prestigious is male authored.

If there remains a problem in placing this women's tradition there remain too

disagreements in describing its distinguishing features. Feminist critics have argued for the 'specificity' of women's writing, that is that women's writing is different from men's on account of the authors' gender: and this 'specificity' has been variously discovered in the themes, tropes and other stylistic features of women's writing. But here, as in debating the issue of the relation of the tradition of women's writing to the 'Great Tradition', we need to move with care. In arguing that in some way women's writing is *essentially* different from men's, feminist critics may paradoxically end up reinforcing those gender relations which it is the feminist project to challenge and unsettle. A more positive approach to the 'specificity' of women's writing would be by way of a stress on the special position of the woman writer within a patriarchal society. Viewed in this way women writers exhibit no essential, ahistorical femininity: rather they can be seen as needing to define themselves as writers within the context of a patriarchal society which in various ways, and to different degrees, through history has limited their access to education and to a public voice, and has sought through the promotion of an ideology of proper femininity to limit what they may say. The remainder of this essay adopts such an approach. It is organized chronologically but it is not intended as an historical survey of women's writing in England. It attempts rather by focusing on a number of case studies to illustrate some key issues in the study of women's writing.

## From Renaissance to Restoration

Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed then Eve. (1 Timothy: 11-13)

There is nothing that doth so commend, advance, set forth, adorn, deck, trim and garnish a maid as silence. And this noble virtue may the virgins learn of that most holy, pure and glorious virgin Mary, which when she either heard or saw any worthy or notable thing, blabbed it not out straightways to her gossips, as the manner of women is at this present day, but being silent, she kept all those sayings sacred, and pondered them in her heart. (Quoted in Jardine, 1983, p. 107)

The dumbness of Elizabethan women, of which Virginia Woolf complained, although not as total as she believed, has to be seen in the context of a Judeo-Christian tradition that prescribed silence and subjection to male authority as the signs of womanly virtue. The 'proper' role for women was to be the bearer of children, not the bearer of the word. The good woman is one who is silent, or at least one whose voice is muted. The highest praise that Lear can bestow on his good daughter Cordelia is that 'Her voice was ever soft, gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman'. Conversely, his evil daughters Goneril and Regan reveal their unwomanliness by the ease with which they manipulate language. Women who spoke out were deemed transgressive or deviant and labelled 'shrews', 'scolds' or 'gossips' (see Jardine, 1983, pp. 103-40).

Differential access to education reinforced this silencing of women's voices. While some of the great Humanist educators advocated a more enlightened attitude to women's education, generally speaking women were denied access to the classical education that provided the authoritative models for all kinds of literary discourse. The poet Anne Finch, Countess of Winchelsea, protested against the kind of education deemed suitable for women:

Good breeding, fashion, dancing, dressing, play  
Are the accomplishments we should desire;  
To write, to read, to think, or to enquire  
Would cloud our beauty, and exhaust our time,  
And interrupt the conquests of our prime;  
Whilst the dull manage of a servile house,  
Is held by some, our utmost art and use.

(Quoted in Goreau, 1980, p. 29)

The confinement of women to the private sphere debarred them from the most public arena of literary production, the theatre, where women's roles were played by young male actors. Other forms of privileged writing were hardly more accommodating to women. The tradition of amatory verse, modelled on French and Italian forms, was predicated on a male speaking subject addressing a silent woman. In this tradition women could be the muse of poetry but not its maker. The 'Coy Mistress' of Marvell's poem, reduced to a conventional catalogue of bodily parts, is not even muse so much as pretext for the male speaker's bravura display of *his* subjectivity, *his* wit and learning. John Donne's 'coy mistress' in 'The Flea' has, it appears, a more substantial presence than Marvell's, but even she 'speaks' only in the gap between the words. In any case her agency is an illusion, a trap sprung by the male 'I' which speaks the poem. His triumphant capping of her argument in the final couplet reaffirms the prescribed gender roles and characteristics of an andocentric literary culture, where the male is the speaking subject and the female is silent and subjected.

How may women find a voice in such andocentric discourse? One way, as feminist critics have noted, is by revising current literary forms to accommodate a woman's voice and experience. Thus the poet Katherine Philips (1631–64) borrows the tropes of the amatory lyric tradition to write poems of idealized female friendship. Here she borrows from a number of Donne's love poems to celebrate her relationship with 'Rosania':

But neither chance nor compliment  
Did element our love;  
'Twas sacred sympathy was lent  
Us from the quire above.  
That friendship fortune did create,  
Still fears a wound from time or fate.

Our chang'd and mingled souls are grown  
To such acquaintance now,  
That if each would resume her own  
Alas! we know not how.  
We have each other so engrost  
That each is in the union lost...

Thus our twin souls in one shall grow,  
And teach the world new love,  
Redeem the age and sex, and show  
A flame fate dares not move:  
And courting death to be our friend,  
Our lives together we shall end.

(Quoted in Morgan, 1981, pp. 3–4)

Philips's position as author illustrates another issue of constant interest to feminist critics. Since silence is the condition of the 'proper' woman, those women who do enter the 'male' world of literary production inevitably display a troubled self-consciousness about their relation to writing. Hence Philips excuses her transgressive behaviour as a poet by constructing an elaborate pose of feminine modesty and self-effacement: 'I never writ a line in my life with intention to have it printed ... sometimes I think that to make verses is so much above my reach, and a diversion so unfit for the sex to which I belong, that I am about to resolve against it forever' (Goreau, 1980, p. 145). Versions of this disclaimer may be heard echoing through the centuries of women's writing. Certainly it is possible to suspect that Philips is not being entirely truthful in denying her desire for literary recognition. At the same time it is clear that for women writers fame very easily slides into infamy.

The problem is very clearly seen in the career of Philips's younger contemporary, the poet, dramatist, satirist and novelist Aphra Behn (1640?–89), known to her contemporaries as 'Astrea'. A prolific writer, celebrated in her own day but thereafter consigned to obscurity, Behn offers one of the most notable examples of what has been called the 'transience of female fame'. While Restoration comedy, the mode in which Behn achieved her most significant successes, suffered generally in later literary histories because of its supposed licentiousness, Behn suffered obscurity and censure on account of her sex. When her works were republished at the end of the nineteenth century a critic in a prestigious journal declared 'it is a pity her books did not rot with her bones' (Goreau, 1980, p. 14). Yet Virginia Woolf recognized her significance as the first Englishwoman to earn her living by writing: 'All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn ... for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds' (1993, p. 60).

As a woman who was willing to be recognized as the author of her own works, and who declared defiantly that she wrote 'for bread', Behn had, of necessity, to construct for herself a literary identity very different from that adopted by Katherine Philips. The pose of womanly self-effacement would not do for a writer set on entering the public world of the theatre, the most commercial form of literary production in the seventeenth century. The restoration of the monarchy in 1660, and the accompanying reaction against the repression of the Commonwealth period, prompted the emergence of new kinds of drama and new opportunities for women to enter the theatre. In 1662 Charles II published a warrant requiring that, contrary to the practices of the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatres, women's roles were to be played by women. The appearance of actresses was quickly followed by the appearance of women dramatists. Katherine Philips produced a verse translation of Corneille's *Pompey*, which may have been the first drama by a woman produced on

the English stage. However, for a woman to write a tragedy, and publish it anonymously, was clearly far less of a challenge to accepted stereotypes of femininity than to write comedy, especially the witty comedy of sexual intrigue which was the staple of the Restoration stage. In an age in which licentiousness was fashionable, and even politically correct, it was unproblematic for male dramatists like Etherege and Wycherley to be identified with the lifestyles of their fictional rake heroes, but the operation of the sexual double standard meant that Behn was condemned for writing with the same frankness about sexual mores. When we look for the specifically female characteristics of Behn's writing they are not to be found so much in the content of her comedies – which are no more nor less licentious than those of her male contemporaries and composed of the same stock ingredients – but rather in her perceived need as a woman to negotiate for herself a literary identity that would justify her writing as she did.

This writing self appears most clearly in the epilogues to her plays and in the prefaces she composed for the published versions of them. The Epilogue to her comedy *Sir Patient Fancy* (1678) was devised to be spoken by an actress:

I here and there o'erheard a coxcomb cry,  
 Ah, rot it – 'tis a woman's comedy,  
 One, who because she lately chanced to please us,  
 With her damned stuff will never cease to tease us.  
 What has poor woman done that she must be,  
 Debarred from sense and sacred poetry?

(Behn, 1992, pp. 329–30)

Here the actress speaks for the woman dramatist in anticipating the audience's criticism of women's writing and protesting women's exclusion from literary discourse. Yet, as it proceeds, this alliance of actress and woman author becomes more problematic:

Because we do not laugh at you when lewd,  
 And scorn and cudgel ye when you are rude;  
 That we have nobler souls than you, we prove,  
 By how much more we're sensible of love;  
 Quickest in finding all the subtlest ways  
 To make your joys: why not to make you plays?

The profession of actress was linked in the public mind with that of prostitute or courtesan, and many of the best-known actresses of the Restoration stage, like Elizabeth Barry and Nell Gwyn (to whom Behn dedicated a play), were the mistresses of members of the royal family or the aristocracy. The Restoration stage exploited the sexuality of the woman acting, particularly in the notorious 'breeches' roles, in which actresses played women disguising themselves as boys (see Todd, 1993). In thus identifying herself with the actress who speaks her defence of women's writing Behn represents herself as woman dramatist/prostitute, and her play becomes by analogy a kind of sexual servicing. In terms of English culture this association of the actress with the prostitute long made the theatre a problematic area for women's participation. Even in the nineteenth century the term 'public woman' connoted both prostitute and actress.

Yet, even as she appears to acquiesce in this sexualizing of the woman author, Behn seeks to define for herself a different identity in the literary world by intervening in the privileged 'male' discourse of literary theory:

Your way of writing's out of fashion grown.  
Method and rule – you only understand,  
Pursue that way of fooling, and be damned.  
Your learned cant of action, time and place,  
Must all give way to the unlaboured farce.  
To all the men of wit we will subscribe:  
But for you half-wits, you unthinking tribe,  
We'll let you see, what e'er besides we do,  
How artfully we copy some of you:  
And if you're drawn to th' life, pray tell me then  
Why women should not write as well as men.

Since comedy, she argues, is based on observation of contemporary manners, and requires no special learning, women are as well qualified as men to write it. Despite the vehemence of this attack on the 'learned cant' of neo-classical dramatic theory we can sense the defensiveness of the woman writer who cannot rely on the authority bestowed by knowledge of the classical languages to give legitimacy to her public identity as an author. In a poem dedicated to Thomas Creech, praising his translation of Lucretius, she confesses herself 'unlearned in schools' and laments 'the scanted customs of the nation', which, in restricting women's educational opportunities, confines the woman writer to her mother tongue, 'the fulsome jingle of the times', and so limits her range and authority as author. Despite the educational disadvantage she suffered as a woman Behn clearly desired a literary identity other than that of hack writer or notorious poetess/punk (prostitute), as is evident in the poems she wrote to commemorate state occasions. Towards the end of her career she was ready to admit frankly that she wrote not simply for 'bread' but to earn the fame accorded to male authors:

All I ask, is the privilege for my masculine part, the poet in me (if any such you will allow me), to tread in those successful paths my predecessors have so long thrived in ... If I must not, because of my sex, have this freedom, but you will usurp all to yourselves; I lay down my quill, and you shall hear no more of me ... for I am not content to write for a third day only [when, traditionally, box office receipts went to the dramatist]. I value fame as much as if I had been born a hero; and if you rob me of that, I can retire from the ungrateful world, and scorn its fickle favours. (1992, p. 21)

Thus the seventeenth century gives us two competing models of the woman writer. On the one hand there is Katherine Philips, honoured with the title of 'the chaste Orinda', confining herself in terms of genre and subject matter to that which is properly 'feminine', and making no claim to fame or a public, professional identity as author. On the other we have the scandalous Aphra Behn, 'Astrea', who recognizes no disability or lack in the woman writer other than that which results from educational disadvantage, and stakes her claim to full membership of a literary fellowship composed almost exclusively of men, 'my predecessors'. These two



models serve to illustrate a fundamental question concerning women's relation to writing, which is often posed in terms of a debate between the notions of 'difference' and 'androgyny', whether, that is, women may be argued to write out of their femininity – however defined – or whether literary creativity transcends sexual difference. (See Todd's edition of Behn's *Oroonoko, The Rover and Other Works* (1992), and also her *Gender, Art and Death* (1993) for an important discussion of the woman author's quest for a literary identity. Morgan's *The Female Wits* (1981) prints plays by neglected seventeenth-century women dramatists and provides biographical information. Goreau's *Reconstructing Aphra* (1980) provides much valuable information about attitudes to women's education.)

### **The woman writer and the rise of the novel**

Behn might claim recognition for 'my masculine part, the poet in me', but no eighteenth-century woman could have echoed such a demand. Significantly, the eighteenth century offered new opportunities to women writers while at the same time defining 'feminine' writing more restrictively (see Spencer, 1986).

The new opportunities came with the rise of the novel, the literary form with which women writers have always seemed to have a special affinity. That women found a literary identity as novelists was in large measure due to the newness of the form. As Virginia Woolf noted, 'all the other forms of literature were hardened and set by the time she became a writer. The novel alone was young enough to be soft in her hands' (1993, p. 70). Most importantly, the novel did not require a classical education, the lack of which Behn had felt so keenly. The forms of private, informal writing that women were accustomed to practise, such as the letter and the journal, provided a suitable training for novel-writing. Behn had argued that because comedy depended on observation of manners it was a suitable genre for women. Many eighteenth-century women novelists could have advanced the same argument in defence of their novel-writing ambitions. Woolf's observation about the early nineteenth-century women novelists, 'all the literary training that a woman had ... was training in the observation of character, in the analysis of emotion. Her sensibility had been educated for centuries by the influences of the common sitting-room' (1993, p. 61), could as readily be applied to their eighteenth-century predecessors like Fanny Burney.

While an expanding literary market and a new form brought increased opportunities for women writers an increasing emphasis on sexual difference and on the special role of women meant that women writers were expected to write out of a restricted definition of 'femininity'. What this meant for them is well illustrated by the praise of a critic in 1769 reviewing a novel written by a woman:

The representation of domestic life is a source of moral entertainment, perhaps the most instructive and congenial to the universal taste of mankind, of all the various scenes with which the human drama presents us. It is within the compass of that narrow sphere that the tender emotions of the heart are exerted in their utmost sensibility. (Spencer, 1986, p. 21)

Thus a male cultural establishment grants women writers authority within a 'narrow sphere' which is properly feminine, domestic life, sentiment and morality, while preserving for itself the prestigious forms, poetry and drama, and the 'great' subjects. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries women writers were to suffer the effects of this double bind. On the one hand they were exhorted to write about what they knew – the virtues of domestic life, the characters of women – and advised to avoid those areas of experience which their education and circumstances left them ill-equipped to understand. On the other hand, the novel itself while it was particularly associated with women, both in terms of authorship and audience, was rated a 'low' form, as Jane Austen's famous defence of women's novels in *Northanger Abbey* (1818) suggests:

'And what are you reading, Miss –?' 'Oh! it is only a novel!' replies the young lady; while she lays down her book with affected indifference or momentary shame. – 'It is only Cecilia or Camilla [both by Burney], or Belinda [Maria Edgeworth, 1801]'; or, in short, only some work in which the greatest powers of the mind are displayed, in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language.

This mixed experience of increased opportunity and increased restriction is well illustrated by the career of Fanny Burney, the most esteemed woman novelist of the eighteenth century (on Burney's career see Epstein, 1989). Success as a writer brought Burney the approval of such luminaries as Dr Johnson, financial success beyond anything achieved by Aphra Behn, and even a royal pension. At the same time the constraints imposed on the woman writer by the demand that she conform to the age's image of proper femininity are evident at every stage of her career.

Burney's literary training was in the keeping of a journal, begun when she was 16. While the journal may be seen as essentially an artless form of private, 'feminine' writing, Burney's included character sketches, conversations and anecdotes, and it was written in the consciousness that it would be read by family and close friends. Thus the distinctions between private writing and literature were being blurred. From this beginning it was a relatively short step to the production of a novel in letters, *Evelina* (1778). Negotiations for the publication of the book were conducted via male relatives and the work appeared anonymously.

In her preface to the book Burney reveals her own anxieties about offering the public so 'low' a form as the novel: 'In the republic of letters, there is no member of such inferior rank, or who is so much disdained by his brethren of the quill, as the humble Novelist.' As the preface continues it becomes clear that the low status of the novel is linked to its 'feminine' subject matter and presumed female readership. Catching the disapproving tone of many male critics of the time she makes slighting reference to the baneful influence of novels on 'young ladies in general, and boarding-school damsels in particular', and to the novel's predilection for 'the fantastic regions of Romance ... where Reason is an outcast'. Doubly disguised by anonymity and insistent use of the masculine pronoun Burney seeks to align herself with a tradition of male greats, 'our predecessors ... Rousseau, Johnson, Marivaux,

Fielding, Richardson, and Smollet'. While this may seem a move comparable to Aphra Behn's insistence on her right to inclusion in a male literary tradition, the positions that the two women writers occupy is, in fact, quite different. Behn openly acknowledges her gender and refuses to accept that it limits her as a writer. Burney takes refuge in a masculine literary persona, and, acknowledging the 'feminine' subject of her novel, 'a Young Lady's Entrance into the World', seeks to distance herself from the female purveyors of Romance and the Marvellous and to align herself with a male literary tradition exemplified by its adherence to the masculine attributes of Reason and Nature. In presenting a virtuous, erring heroine who is to be schooled in the constraints that society imposes on 'proper' women Burney makes the feminine novel acceptable by aligning it with the conduct book.

On the surface at least *Evelina* appears to fulfil the conditions laid down in Burney's Preface, demonstrating to its youthful, female readers their need for male authority and direction. The erring *Evelina* moves from the authority of one male mentor, her guardian, Mr Villars, to that of another, her husband, Lord Orville. Essentially her quest is for a man to belong to – whether father or husband – who will ensure her status and identity in a patriarchal society. On the other hand, this surface conformity allows for a covert criticism of the very ideology the novel appears to endorse. (A comparable strategy of surface conformity and covert criticism seems to operate in Sarah Fielding's *The Adventures of David Simple* (1744), where the device of a male protagonist provides the novelist with a cover to explore critically the limitations placed on women's intellectual development and their restricted opportunities for economic independence.) Employing the 'private' form of the letter, and relying on the inexperience of her erring heroine, who may reasonably express opinions which the novelist could not as narrator endorse, Burney is able to present vigorous criticism of the social rules which constrained 'proper' women. So *Evelina* at her first public ball protests at the convention which allows men the choice of partners, while restricting women's power to say no:

The gentlemen, as they passed and repassed, looked as if they thought we were quite at their disposal, and only waiting for the honour of their commands; and they sauntered about, in a careless indolent manner, as if with a view to keep us in suspense.... I thought it so provoking, that I determined, in my own mind, that, far from humouring such airs, I would rather not dance at all, than with any one who should seem to think me ready to accept the first partner who would condescend to take me.

So successful is Burney in presenting a conforming surface that Mr Villars's letters of moral exhortation to *Evelina* were later detached from the novel and printed separately as a manual of advice for young ladies: yet the fact is that the plot of the novel cuts *Evelina* loose from male authority to encounter the world and define herself as heroine alone. In so doing it may be said to cater to the fantasies of independence of its female readers.

*Evelina* was rightly praised for the liveliness of its dialogue and its social comedy. These attributes of the novel suggest that Burney's literary gifts could well have developed in the direction of drama, and, in fact, her next production after *Evelina* was a comedy, *The Witlings*. In all Burney wrote four comedies and four

blank verse tragedies, but only one play, the tragedy, *Edwy and Elgiva*, was performed, and then on only one occasion. Her thwarted career as a dramatist, and especially as a writer of comedy, well illustrates the difficulties experienced by the woman writer whose authorial identity cannot be allowed to conflict with her core identities as proper lady and dutiful daughter. At every juncture of her career Burney defers to the authority of father figures who censor her work, accepting the view of her father and a surrogate father, Samuel Crisp, that writing for the stage was 'unfeminine'. As Crisp noted in a letter to Burney concerning *The Witlings*, comedy poses a threat to feminine propriety: 'I will never allow you to sacrifice a grain of female delicacy for all the wit of Congreve and Vanbrugh put together' (Spencer, 1986, p. 97). Burney acceded to this patriarchal control – 'I would a thousand times rather forfeit my character as a writer, than risk ridicule or censor as a female' – though she continued to give vent to her comic talents in three plays which were not performed.

In her anxious awareness that her authorial self may compromise her identity as 'proper lady' Burney is at one with many women writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as, for example, Charlotte Brontë enquiring from her friend and fellow novelist Elizabeth Gaskell,

Do you ... find it easy, when you sit down to write, to isolate yourself from all those ties, and their sweet associations, so as to be quite *your own woman*, uninfluenced, unswayed by the consciousness of how your work may affect other minds; what blame, what sympathy, it may call forth? (Wise and Symington, 1980, vol. 4, p. 76)

If literary history has failed to give due recognition to Fanny Burney's place in the development of the novel of manners it has also consigned to the sidelines the eighteenth century's other most notable woman novelist, Ann Radcliffe. Yet her Gothic romances were not only successful and highly praised in her own day but were a significant influence on the major Romantic poets. Like Burney she conformed to the age's image of the woman writer, living a retiring, domestic life and declining all opportunities for public notice on the strength of her literary successes. So private and unremarkable was her life that the poet Christina Rossetti had to give up a plan to write a biography because of a lack of material. Radcliffe is known today as the butt of Jane Austen's satire in *Northanger Abbey*, yet there are positive influences to be traced between Austen and her predecessor, and the Gothic mode Radcliffe pioneered found a new form in the literary imagination of Charlotte Brontë.

The improbabilities of Radcliffe's plots, in which unprotected, wandering heroines face danger in foreign climes, seem to set her apart from the concerns of the feminine novel of domestic realism. Yet there is much to link Radcliffe with novelists like Burney and Austen. Like Evelina, Emily, the heroine of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), undergoes a rite of passage into womanhood unprotected by the presence of authoritative male guardians. Thus, like Burney, Radcliffe offers her female readership a fantasy of freedom of action, and indeed freedom of choice: for Emily, left an orphan and an heiress, resolutely defends her inheritance from the machinations of the villain Montoni, and, having secured it, prudently satisfies

herself as to the character and circumstances of her would-be husband Vallancourt, before favouring him with her hand and fortune. In other ways too the novel seems, however unconsciously, to cater to female fantasies of empowerment. Emily's two brothers die in childhood and her mother is rapidly disposed of in the first chapter of the novel. She is left then to enjoy the undivided attentions of a loving father who lavishes on her the sort of education denied most women. Besides the usual stock of feminine accomplishments she is taught the sciences and Latin. Her father also teaches her to temper 'feminine' sensibility with reason and self-command, virtues she will exhibit throughout the novel as she faces with extraordinary equanimity all the terrors of being the prisoner of the villainous Montoni. Thus, while the story pays allegiance to the need for patriarchal control of women, it also gives us a heroine who proves herself adept in the values that society deemed 'masculine'.

In Radcliffe's hands the Gothic also, whether consciously or not, becomes a vehicle for expressing suppressed sexual anxieties and desires which could only appear heavily encoded in the novel of manners practised by Burney. The menacing figure of Montoni and the terrors of imprisonment experienced by Emily find an echo in the many images of imprisonment and enclosure which feminist critics have found to be pervasive in nineteenth-century women's literature. Seen in this light they suggest that the history of women's writing can profitably be read not only as a history of oppression – that is, in relation to women's differential access to education and to a public voice – but also as a history of repression.

Jane Austen has always been assured a place in the 'Great Tradition' of the English novel, but although this judgement usually includes a rather condescending reference to her self-imposed limitation to what as a woman she could know, '3 or 4 families in a country village', it has not until recently recognized her as part of a woman's tradition of novel writing. Yet in the fullness and complexity with which she presents a woman's consciousness at the centre of her fictions, and her concern with money and women's economic dependence, Austen's work is illuminated by being read alongside those earlier women novelists, Burney, Edgeworth, Brunton and Radcliffe, with whose works she was in dialogue. (Spencer, 1986 and Todd, 1993 both contain valuable discussions of the eighteenth-century women novelists. See also Spender, 1986 and the Pandora Press reprints of neglected texts by early women novelists, published under the same collective title.) For a detailed discussion of the work of Radcliffe, Burney, Austen and other women writers of the eighteenth century, see Unit 9.

## The nineteenth century

There were, as Janet Todd notes, excellent women poets in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century – she cites Anna Laetitia Barbauld, Hannah More, Anna Seward, Charlotte Smith, Helen Maria Williams and Mary Robinson – but there are no woman *Romantic* poets, 'giving that phrase all the privileged force it has acquired within later literary studies' (1988, p. 111). As Leon Litvak suggests (see Unit 10, 'Romanticism 1780–1830', pp. 235–6) the (male) Romantic preoccupation with selfhood and individuality marginalizes the female listener and privileges a poetic

discourse in which it is difficult for women to intervene as speaking subjects. In *Villette* (1853) Charlotte Brontë drew on images derived from her reading of the Romantic poets for an ambiguous portrait of the Romantic artist in her portrait of the actress Vashti. Part angel and part demon, Vashti is both inspiring and at the same time a focus of anxiety, for in her acting she performs herself rather than any role:

For a while – a long while – I thought it was only a woman, though an unique woman, who moved in might and grace before this multitude. By-and-by I recognised my mistake. Behold! I found upon her something neither of woman nor of man: in each of her eyes sat a devil. These evil forces bore her through the tragedy, kept up her feeble strength – for she was but a frail creature; and as the action rose and as the stir deepened, how wildly they shook her with their passions of the pit! They wrote HELL on her straight, haughty brow. They tuned her voice to the note of torment. They writhed her regal face to a demoniac mask. Hate and Murder and Madness incarnate, she stood.

It was a marvellous sight: a mighty revelation.

It was a spectacle low, horrible, immoral.

Significantly, Lucy Snowe, the protagonist/narrator who records Vashti's performance, shares the name of the silent female of Wordsworth's Lucy poems, underlining the degree to which woman writers felt themselves marginalized and subjected within the discourse of Romanticism.

By the mid-nineteenth century the prominence of the woman writer was beyond dispute and the writing woman was the subject of much comment in the periodical press, some of it highly satirical, as in Thackeray's caricature of the mannish Miss Bunion:

Though her poems speak only of love, Miss B. has never been married. She is nearly six feet high; she loves waltzing beyond even poetry; and I think lobster salad as much as either. She confesses to twenty-eight; in which case her first volume, *The Orphan of Gozo*, must have been published when she was three years old. . . . The sufferings she has had to endure are, she says, beyond compare; the poems which she writes breathe a withering passion, a smouldering despair, an agony of spirit that would melt the soul of a drayman. (Helsingier *et al.*, 1983, p. 27. This volume contains much relevant material on the question of the woman writer with extensive quotation from a range of contemporary sources.)

In fairness one should set beside this the same author's handsome praise of *Villette*: 'The good of *Villette* . . . is a very fine style; and a remarkably happy way (which few female authors possess) of carrying a metaphor logically through to its conclusion.' Yet in the same letter he goes on:

I can read a great deal of her life as I fancy her in her book and see that rather than have fame, rather than any other earthly good or mayhap heavenly one, she wants some Tomkins or another to love her and to be in love with. But you see she is a little bit of a creature without a pennyworth of good looks, thirty years old I should think, buried in the country, and eating up her own heart there and no Tomkins will come. (Ray, 1946, vol. 3, p. 232)

The writing woman then is an 'odd' woman, one who having failed to fulfil herself in a proper womanly role, through some failure of femininity (Brontë has 'not a

pennyworth of good looks' and Miss Bunion is 'nearly six feet high') turns to literature for compensation. So, too, G.H. Lewes, one of the most prominent critics of the age, declares that 'the happy wife and busy mother are only forced into literature by some hereditary organic tendency, stronger even than the domestic; and hence it is that the cleverest women are not always those who have written books' (Helsingier *et al.*, 1983, pp. 21–2).

Essentially this is the continuation of the eighteenth-century ideology of femininity, given added point and urgency by the Victorian age's intense preoccupation with the ramifications of the 'Woman Question'. Women writers were still required to write out of some essential femininity, most famously defined in Ruskin's 'Of Queens' Gardens' in his *Sesame and Lilies* (1865) and Coventry Patmore's *Angel in the House* (1854–63), but there were increasing demands for improvements in women's legal status and educational and economic opportunities. The women writers, as their contemporaries realized, participated in this discourse, although, until the advent of feminist criticism, this dimension of their work was ignored or minimized. It is curious that for so long Charlotte Brontë, banished from the university English curriculum in favour of her sister Emily, should appear to a later andocentric literary establishment as an ancestress of Barbara Cartland. Contemporary critics, by contrast, labelled her 'coarse' and 'unfeminine' and were alive to the radical implications of her work, to her subversive rage and the unwomanly self-assertiveness of heroines like Jane Eyre (see, for example, Elizabeth Rigby's infamous review of *Jane Eyre* in *The Quarterly Review*, 84, 1848, pp. 153–85).

It is in this context that we need to see the attempts of Victorian critics to enlist the woman writer in the service of the ideology of the 'Angel in the House'. So, for J.M. Ludlow, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) was

*the woman's book of the age. If the novel addresses itself to the heart, what more natural than that it should then reach it most usefully and perfectly, when coming from the heart of a woman with all the dignity of her sex, full of all wifely and motherly experience?* (Helsingier *et al.*, 1983, p. 55)

Women writers, on the other hand, equally convinced that Stowe's was a woman's book, could derive a far more challenging message from its female authorship. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, for example, cited it as support for her own determination as a writer to speak out on social and political questions:

Not read Mrs Stowe's book! But you *must*. . . For myself, I rejoice in the success, both as a woman and a human being. Oh, and is it possible that you think a woman has no business with questions like the question of slavery? Then she had better use a pen no more. She had better subside into slavery and concubinage herself, I think, as in the times of old, shut herself up with the Penelopes in the 'women's apartment' and take no rank among thinkers and speakers. (Helsingier *et al.*, 1983, p. 41)

At issue was the question of what women writers could or should write. As in the eighteenth century they were still granted competence in the areas of sentiment and private experience, but presumed from the limitations of their experience to be

incompetent to address larger topics. However, as the novel itself shifted from being a 'low' form for the uneducated to becoming the predominant literary form capable of addressing the great, public issues of the age, so this approved feminine writing came increasingly to be seen as a marginalized and lesser form. Women writers were exhorted to confine themselves to feminine topics, and at the same time pronounced trivial for so doing. It is in this context that we should read George Eliot's famous *Westminster Review* article, 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists' (1856), although Eliot's attempt to identify a 'precious speciality' in the work of serious women writers sounds uncomfortably like the maternal influence male critics were ready to praise in works like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Charlotte Brontë shows herself conscious of this dilemma as she refers constantly in her correspondence to the narrowness of her experience, remarking of her last novel, *Villette*, '[it] touches on no matter of public interest' (Wise and Symington, 1980, vol. 4, p. 14). Her friend and biographer Elizabeth Gaskell felt it necessary to preface her 'Condition of England' novel *Mary Barton* (1848), which deals with the relations of capital and labour, with an admission of her own feminine deficiencies: 'I know nothing of Political Economy, or the theories of trade.' Interestingly, Mrs Gaskell called her novel 'John Barton' after the trade unionist who is a central figure, suggesting that it was the political issue of the relations of capital and labour that was her central concern. It was her London publisher who was responsible for naming it after Barton's daughter Mary, the centre of the novel's romantic plot, thus intimating that this was a 'feminine' work from a woman writer.

Implicit in this attempt to prescribe a 'feminine' mode of writing was the conviction that a woman author's sex was inevitably inscribed in her work and could invariably be detected. There is no more interesting example of this than the changing evaluations of the Brontë sisters' first novels, originally published under the pseudonyms of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. As Carol Ohmann has shown ('Emily Brontë in the Hands of Male Critics', excerpted in Eagleton, 1986, pp. 71-2), evaluation and interpretation of the novels changed radically when the sex of the authors became known. The first critics, presuming Ellis Bell to be a man, pronounced his work powerful and original and took as the novel's central subject the representation of cruelty and depravity in the person of Heathcliff. One American critic, fastening on the violence of the action and the language in *Wuthering Heights*, compared the language of the novel to that of Yorkshire farmers or boatmen and complained that the author was, as a male, unable to represent women truly. After 1850, when Charlotte Brontë's 'Biographical Notice' affixed to posthumous editions of her sister's novel made clear the gender and circumstances of the author of *Wuthering Heights*, major critical re-evaluations were in order. The critic of *The Athenaeum* declared *Wuthering Heights* a work of 'female genius and authorship' and 'a more than usually interesting contribution to the history of female authorship in England' and linked it with its 'sister novels', *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey*, as characteristic women's novels, characteristic in the sense that it was essentially a love story. The same assumptions are found in modern criticism of the novel. Raymond Williams, identifying the central experience of the novel as the moment in Chapter 9 when Cathy tries to explain to Nelly Dean her



sense of identification with Heathcliff, uses it to locate Brontë's work in a women's novel tradition, the 'two suitor novel':

Cathy, specifically, marries Linton for what Heathcliff does not have: money, position, ease: the visible elements of society . . . She takes Heathcliff for granted and she marries Linton, and the real dislocation – the disruption, the savagery, the storm – then inevitably follow. (Williams, 1973, p. 67)

What this reading does is to make *Wuthering Heights* a comprehensibly 'feminine' novel, in which the heroine, unlike, for example, Jane Austen's Elizabeth Bennett, makes a purely prudential choice of a husband, ignoring the legitimate demands of the heart. But such a reading is made at the expense of acknowledging Cathy's fervent expression of her romantic love for Edgar Linton in the same passage: 'I love the ground under his feet, and the air over his head, and everything he touches, and every word he says – I love all his looks, and all his actions, and him entirely, and altogether.' On the other hand, when *Wuthering Heights* has been absorbed into the 'Great Tradition', it has been as a 'sport' or as a 'poetic novel', devoid of sociological interest, so that Cathy's passionate protests against the constraints of femininity are ignored.

Fundamentally Victorian critics recognized that writing was an assertion of self at odds with the ideal of self-effacement that was an essential part of the ideal of true womanhood. For those women who aspired to be poets this presented special difficulties. The Romantic poet took himself as subject. Women, on the other hand, were expected to see themselves as 'relative creatures', focused on the needs and feelings of others. Women, as creatures of feeling rather than intellect, were assumed capable of writing lyric poetry. But, in so far as lyric encouraged the free expression of feeling, it ran counter to the prevailing demand for feminine delicacy and restraint. Christina Rossetti could be accommodated to this view of the poetess by ignoring the darker tones of repressed longing and protest in her poems and emphasizing the extent of her religious feeling (for a recent reassessment of Rossetti's work see Kent, 1987, and for a discussion of Rossetti in this volume, see Unit 12, pp. 323–4). However, Elizabeth Barrett Browning presented an overt challenge to Victorian views of women's poetry, in terms of both form and content. As the author of poems of pathos such as 'The Mournful Mother' and 'Bertha in the Lane', she could readily be slotted into the tradition of sentimental poetry exemplified by Felicia Hemans (1793–1835), the age's ideal of the truly feminine poetess. *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) reveals Barrett Browning boldly adopting the self-dramatizing stance of the love poet, an appropriation of a male poetic tradition made acceptable by her status as a married woman and by her frequent self-depreciating comparisons of herself to her husband, Robert Browning. On the other hand, the voice which speaks 'A Curse for a Nation', an abolitionist poem, finally rejects the blandishments of the restrained, feminine poetic voice:

I heard an angel speak last night,  
 And he said 'Write!  
 Write a nation's curse for me,  
 And send it over the Western Sea' ...

'Not so,' I answered once again.  
 'To curse, choose men.  
 For I, a woman, have only known  
 How the heart melts and the tears run down.'  
 'Therefore,' the voice said, 'shalt thou write  
 My curse tonight.  
 Some women weep and curse, I say  
 (And no one marvels), night and day.  
 'And thou shalt take their part tonight,  
 Weep and write.  
 A curse from the depths of womanhood  
 Is very salt, and bitter, and good.'  
 So thus I wrote . . .

In her poems after 1850 she turned to subjects that were outside the range of what were considered suitable subjects for women's poetry: slavery, poverty, Italian nationalism and the position of women. In *Aurora Leigh* (1856) she linked exploration of the 'Woman Question' with a passionate portrayal of the woman artist, a figure who, since Madame de Staël's novel *Corinne* (1807), had both fascinated and disturbed women writers.

*Aurora Leigh* boldly celebrates the woman artist who asserts herself as writing subject and refuses to be confined to the subject matter, forms and voice deemed appropriate for women's verse. It eschews the lyric for the epic mode, claiming a place in a poetic tradition hitherto exclusively male, and it rejects the sentimental for the polemical. Barrett Browning was consciously innovative, describing her work in progress as a 'sort of novel-poem . . . running into the midst of our conventions, and rushing into drawing-rooms and the like "where angels fear to tread"; and so, meeting face to face without mask the Humanity of the age and speaking the truth of it out plainly'. In the persona of her poet heroine, Aurora, she challenges the assumptions about women's literary inspiration and the poetic forms in which it is embodied. In a long passage on the writing of poetry in Book 5 Aurora dismisses the personal and the emotional as the inspiration for women's art:

We women are too apt to look to one,  
 Which proves a certain impotence in art.  
 We strain our natures at doing something great,  
 Far less because it's something great to do,  
 Than haply that we, so commend ourselves  
 As being not small, and more appreciable  
 To some one friend.

Aurora rejects 'this vile woman's way' and with it the 'feminine' forms Barrett Browning had herself practised to critical acclaim, the ballad and the sonnet. Instead she embraces a 'masculine' project, 'to represent the age', not as Tennyson was to do in *Idylls of the King*, in historical garb, but instead exhorting herself to 'catch/ Upon the burning lava of a song/The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted age' in

all its troubling contemporaneity. In keeping with this ambitious manifesto *Aurora Leigh* intertwines the personal with the political, linking the story of Aurora's growth as a poet with issues of class relations, poverty, political theory and the position of women. In so doing Barrett Browning engages with and revises key works by other women writers of her age, Madame de Staël, George Sand and Charlotte Brontë, as Cora Kaplan has shown (Browning, 1978, Introduction). One of the key successes of Gynocriticism has been to uncover these influences and continuities in women's writing which conventional literary history has obscured. Ellen Moers has shown how Barrett Browning in turn proved a potent influence for her younger American contemporary Emily Dickinson.

*Aurora Leigh* was a notably popular work, going through thirteen editions in England by 1873. But the critics were alive to the ways that it challenged literary decorum and perturbed by its ambition and self-assertion. It was the choice of the woman artist herself as subject that prompted their criticisms. One commentator, invoking Thackeray's caricature of the poetess, Miss Bunion, denounced the assertive Aurora as 'a bad specimen even of her very unattractive class', revealing the gendered character of so much Victorian criticism of women's writing. Another saw Barrett Browning's failure as due to 'the erroneous theory that art is the proper subject for itself' (Helsingier *et al.*, 1983, pp. 39–40), conveniently sliding over the fact that it had been *the* great subject of the Romantic poets.

Conventional literary history consigned *Aurora Leigh* to obscurity, despite its contemporary success, remembering Elizabeth Barrett Browning if at all in the role of 'feminine' poet, the author of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, and choosing to ignore her own declaration that it represented 'the most mature of my works, and the one into which my highest convictions upon Life and Art have entered' (for a reassessment of *Aurora Leigh* and a valuable discussion of the way in which the poem engages in dialogue with other contemporary literary works see Kaplan's introduction to her edition).

Poetic writing from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century maintained a closely protected inheritance of devices and registers. This was disrupted by Modernism, and the Modernist movement had among its initiators a significant number of women poets, particularly Gertrude Stein (1874–1946), Amy Lowell (1874–1925), Marianne Moore (1887–1972), Hilda Doolittle ('H.D.') (1886–1961) and Harriet Monroe (1860–1936). Lowell, H.D. and Monroe were active strategists in the evolution of Imagist verse. Imagism rejected the codes and conventions of traditional poetry: these were perceived as barriers to the ideal of a pure, transparent mediation of experience. Free verse was promoted as a means of allowing the texture of the poem to reflect the fluid, unpredictable pattern of perception and thought. Much of the early verse of H.D. and Lowell is ungendered in the sense that the speaker maintains a cool anonymity. Its loose form has no precedent: it cannot usefully be compared with the stylistic habits of a predominantly male tradition. Marianne Moore devised complex and ingenious methods of formal organization (the best known being syllabism), and again the sense of a self-conscious distancing from a patriarchal tradition is evident.

It would be simplistic to claim that, by freeing itself from established traditions, Modernism freed and encouraged the woman poet, but we should bear in mind Anne

Finch's complaint that the woman poet is judged 'an intruder on the rights of men'. Those 'rights' were effectively challenged by the Modernist programme, and a clean slate of formal and referential possibilities was offered, both to the early Modernist woman poets and to their more recent successors: Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich, Stevie Smith and Grace Nichols who are, in various ways, the inheritors of the Modernist revolution, and all find space for a balance between their formal design and their sex. (Miller, 1986, considers these questions and the verse of H.D. and Amy Lowell is discussed in Unit 17.)

### Virginia Woolf and Doris Lessing: difference or androgyny?

In surveying women's writing in earlier periods the emphasis of this unit has been upon the social and historical conditions that serve to explain why women's writing took the forms that it did. Thus the specific character of women's literary production, their choice of subject matter and forms, can be attributed to their differential access to education and experience and to the inhibiting effects of patriarchy. It might then be argued that as women have gained legal equality and equal access to education and public roles so they will increasingly write out of the same consciousness as men; that it is no longer valid or even desirable to talk about a women's tradition or to see the woman writer as occupying a special position because of her gender. It may even be argued that the crucial task that remains for feminism in the late twentieth century is to deconstruct the masculine/feminine opposition, to reveal it as a limiting cultural construct rather than an essential difference. This is an unresolved argument within feminist criticism, often expressed in terms of the opposed categories of 'difference' and 'androgyny'. In this final section I wish to explore some of the ramifications of this debate in relation to two leading women writers of the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) and Doris Lessing (1919–).

No account of gender and writing could ignore Virginia Woolf. Her occasional essays on forgotten or neglected women writers and her treatise *A Room of One's Own* (1929) make her the pioneer of the critical practice that Showalter later labelled Gynocriticism. Clearly it was crucial for Woolf as a novelist to locate herself in relation to the tradition of women's writing she herself did so much to recover. *A Room of One's Own* grew out of two talks on the subject of women and fiction that she was invited to give to the women's colleges of Cambridge. In the treatise she represents herself in semi-fictional mode researching her topic among the authorities of the British Museum, reflecting upon the facts of women's economic dependence and upon the consequences of patriarchy for women. The thesis that emerges insistently from these researches is that literary production is determined by social and material conditions so that women's experience of oppression and repression is inscribed in their writing.

Yet in opposition to this materialist thesis Woolf also advances an ideal of artistic integrity that transcends gender differences. Her highest praise is reserved for those women writers like Emily Brontë and Jane Austen who achieve such integrity

because, although they write as women write and not as men write, they write without a consciousness of their sex. It is then in keeping with this ideal of transcendence that her treatise should move to a conclusion that endorses androgyny rather than difference as the proper goal of the woman writer. Thus, after ninety pages devoted to describing why women's writing is different, she finally declares herself ready to write her talk on the subject of women and fiction, and 'the very first sentence that I would write here ... is that it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly' (1993, p. 94).

However, this embracing of the ideal of androgyny is not the whole story. In the first place it is offered as an ideal for the future, for some imagined age less conscious of sexual difference. Secondly, it is challenged by a different vision of the future direction of women's writing, a future of difference, envisaged through her reflections on the possible literary development of the new woman novelist 'Mary Carmichael', whose project will be to put into representation that which the masculine discourses of history, biography and the 'naturalist-novel' have ignored or distorted, those 'infinitely obscure lives' (p. 81):

With the eye of imagination I saw a very ancient lady crossing the street on the arm of a middle-aged woman, her daughter, perhaps, both so respectably booted and furred that their dressing in the afternoon must be a ritual, and the clothes themselves put away in cupboards with camphor, year after year, throughout the summer months. They cross the road when the lamps are being lit (for the dusk is their favourite hour), as they must have done year after year. The elder is close on eighty; but if one asked her what her life has meant to her, she would say that she remembered the streets lit for the battle of Balaclava, or had heard the guns fire in Hyde Park for the birth of Edward the Seventh. And if one asked her, longing to pin down the moment with date and season, but what were you doing on the fifth of April 1869, or the second of November 1875, she would look vague and say that she could remember nothing. For all the dinners are cooked; the plates and cups washed; the children sent to school and gone out into the world. Nothing remains of it all. All has vanished. No biography or history has a word to say about it. And the novels, without meaning to, inevitably lie. (pp. 80-1)

Here the androgynous vision of the future gives way to a vision of difference. The task of the woman artist will be to represent this 'accumulation of unrecorded life' (p. 81), and it is a task that requires nothing less than a radical breaking apart and remaking of the masculine discourses that have rendered women's lives and women's creativity invisible. *A Room of One's Own* may itself be seen as a radical revisioning of the masculine discourse of historiography. In *To the Lighthouse* (1927) Woolf produced an equally radical revisioning of the novel, rejecting the linear form of the 'naturalist' novel for the 'contemplative' form she identified as feminine. This contemplative form consigns to parentheses the elements of the traditional novelistic plot – the deaths of Mrs Ramsay and her son and daughter – to focus on the opposed ideals of androgyny and difference through the relations of the 'feminine' woman, Mrs Ramsay and her surrogate daughter, the woman artist Lily Briscoe. In part, the narrator's portrait of Mrs Ramsay, the archetypal 'Angel in the House', whose creativity is expended in the 'feminine' roles of wife, mother and hostess, and in the

daily business of living, exemplifies the task that Woolf had assigned to her young woman novelist, Mary Carmichael, of recording and celebrating 'the accumulation of unrecorded life', as Mrs Ramsay herself is commemorated in Lily Briscoe's portrait of her. Lily recognizes that her own attempt in art 'to make of the moment something permanent' is analogous to Mrs Ramsay's artistry in living. Yet Lily's role as woman artist also involves rejecting the femininity Mrs Ramsay exemplifies for the sake of artistic creativity. As Lily progresses towards the completion of her painting, language and imagery suggest that she achieves momentarily an artistic integrity born of the fusion of male and female sexual energies:

Then, as if some juice necessary for the lubrication of her faculties were spontaneously squirted, she began precariously dipping among the blues and ambers, moving her brush hither and thither, but it was now heavier and went slower, as if it had fallen in with some rhythm which was dictated to her (she kept looking at the hedge, at the canvas) by what she saw, so that while her hand quivered with life, this rhythm was strong enough to bear her along with it on its current. Certainly she was losing consciousness of outer things, and her name, and her personality and her appearance, and whether Mr Carmichael was there or not, her mind kept throwing up from its depths, scenes and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas, like a fountain spurting over that glaring, hideously difficult white space, while she modelled it with greens and blues.

At this moment Lily appears to paint, as Woolf had required the woman novelist to write, without a consciousness of her sex: 'But the war had drawn the sting of her femininity. Poor devils, one thought, poor devils of both sexes, getting into such messes'. Yet the obstacles that lie in the way of achieving that androgynous vision are apparent. While she paints Lily is assailed by memories of the voice of masculine authority that reiterates the message 'women can't write, women can't paint', and by her realization that her painting will be relegated to the servants' bedrooms or languish rolled up under the sofa.

Moreover, the completion of Lily's painting is counterpointed by the completion of a second subject announced in the novel's opening sequence, the journey to the lighthouse. This second subject ends in a manner that puts into question the very possibility of androgyny. As Cam and James, Mr Ramsay's daughter and son, embark with him on the crossing to the lighthouse they are joined in a secret compact to resist the tyranny of the patriarchal law of the father, which determines the opposition of masculine and feminine and the hierarchical relations between them. Yet the omens are not good. Behind them lie the exemplary histories of their dead sister and brother, Prue who died in childbirth and Andrew who was killed in the war. As their journey progresses each is constructed as a gendered subject in conformity with the patriarchal law Mr Ramsay represents. Cam, unable to resist her father's demand for sympathy and love, takes on the 'feminine' caring role of her dead mother. James, steering their boat to its destination, finds in the image of the lighthouse, seen for the first time at close quarters, confirmation of a 'masculine' knowledge and identity shared with his father and defined by its opposition to the 'feminine':

it was a stark tower on a bare rock. It satisfied him. It confirmed some obscure feeling of his about his own character. The old ladies, he thought, thinking of the garden at home,

went dragging their chairs about on the lawn. Old Mrs Beckworth, for example, was always saying how nice it was and how they ought to be so proud and they ought to be so happy, but as a matter of fact James thought, looking at the Lighthouse stood there on its rock, it's like that. He looked at his father reading fiercely with his legs curled tight. They shared that knowledge.

There is at least the suggestion at the end of *To the Lighthouse* that this perpetuation of the hierarchical opposition of masculine and feminine renders the androgynous vision fragile and marginalized. Moreover, despite Woolf's insistence in *A Room of One's Own* that certain great male authors were androgynous – she cites Shakespeare, Keats, Sterne, Cowper, Lamb and Coleridge – it is to be inferred from *To the Lighthouse* that the responsibility for creating an androgynous art of the future rests with women artists. (For valuable discussion of the issues raised by Woolf's analysis of women's writing and its relation to her own fictions see Bowlby, 1988, and Barrett's introductions to *Virginia Woolf: Women and Writing*, 1979, and her edition of *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, 1993).

Where Virginia Woolf sought to define herself as a writer in dialogue with a tradition of women's writing Doris Lessing began her prolific writing career with the explicit aim of emulating the range of the male 'greats' of nineteenth-century European realism, whose work describes 'the intellectual and moral climate of their age' (Preface to *The Golden Notebook*). Her ambitious sequence of five novels, *Children of Violence* (1952–69), charts the development of Martha Quest, as she moves from white, colonial Africa to post-war England. The range of the novels' concerns challenged prevailing assumptions about the women's novel as small scale and focused upon personal relationships. Like the male protagonists of the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* Martha's experience encompasses the political – racism, colonialism, the Cold War, Marxism and the threat of nuclear war – as well as the personal.

After the third of the Martha Quest novels Lessing broke new ground with *The Golden Notebook* (1962), a novel which questions the veracity of the classic realism she had earlier espoused. For many of her readers, however, what was striking about *The Golden Notebook* was not its fractured, experimental form, but its bold exploration of female subjectivity and its willingness to address openly issues of female sexuality. It was quickly hailed as a feminist classic. However, Lessing herself declared 'this novel was not a trumpet for Women's Liberation' (Preface), and while voicing her support for women's rights, complained that 'the book was instantly belittled, by friendly reviewers, as well as by hostile ones, as being about the sex war' (Preface). The key word in this complaint is, surely, 'belittled'. Lessing is anxiously rejecting the label of 'woman writer', conscious of the marginalized status accorded to those who write about women's experience. The protagonist of *The Golden Notebook*, Anna Wulf, shares many of the life experiences, both personal and political, of Martha Quest – an upbringing in colonial Africa, failed relationships with men, involvement in and later disillusionment with left-wing politics, psychotherapy and mental breakdown. Lessing is still concerned, as in the *Children of Violence* sequence, to present a wide-ranging image of the 'ideological "feel" of our mid-century'.

What is new in *The Golden Notebook* is that this questioning is effected through the experience of a female protagonist who is also a novelist. Lessing might argue that the experience of her novelist heroine, struggling to find words and form to express her sense of a fractured reality, is pertinent to any contemporary writer, whether male or female, but much of Anna's experience bears directly on her position as a woman writer.

Anna has published one successful novel 'Frontiers of War', based on her experience of racism and left-wing activism in wartime colonial Africa, which she afterwards repudiates as filled with a 'terrible, lying nostalgia'. She is pursued by an agent who wants to turn her book into a film with the title 'Forbidden Love', seeing in it a typical, marketable woman's fiction about a doomed love affair. In Anna's yellow notebook, which is the draft of a novel 'The Shadow of the Third', she records the story of Ella, a journalist on a women's magazine, who has written a handful of short stories which she satirically describes as 'sensitive and feminine', and who is writing a novel about a young man who commits suicide. Her lover, Paul, a psychiatrist, patronizes her writing and deems her incapable of dealing with a subject on which he is the voice of authority. To her friend Julia, Ella 'makes bitter jokes about Jane Austen hiding her novels under the blotting paper when people come into the room', and quotes Stendhal's dictum that any woman under fifty who writes should do so under a pseudonym. Anna herself faces the perennial criticism levelled at woman writers, that she writes 'little novels about the emotions'. In her Preface to the novel Lessing addresses the split between the personal and the political, so often represented in terms of the opposition of feminine and masculine, declaring 'the essence of the book, the organisation of it, everything in it, says implicitly and explicitly, that we must not divide things off, must not compartmentalise'.

While the need to resist compartmentalizing is related to many of the concerns raised in *The Golden Notebook*, it has a particular significance for Anna, the woman writer. Towards the end of the novel Anna and her lover, the American, Saul Green, another writer who is unable to write, share the experience of mental breakdown. During the course of these breakdowns they are engaged in a bitter 'sex war', each seeing masculine and feminine values and expectations as opposed and contradictory. However, out of the experience of breakdown each attains a new sense of a self that includes the other. Even as they part Anna senses that they 'would always be flesh of one flesh and think each other's thoughts'. The tangible result of this new self that includes both masculine and feminine is that each is now able to write. Anna gives Saul her treasured golden notebook, that has lain unused, and writes in it for him the opening sentence of a novel that Saul afterwards completes, and he does the same for her. Initially it seems that Anna gives Saul the idea for a 'masculine' fiction – his story begins 'On a dry hillside in Algeria, a soldier watched the moonlight glinting on his rifle' – while he gives her a sentence, 'The two women were alone in the London flat', which seems to announce a typically 'feminine' fiction. But, in fact, Saul's book, about the personal relationship that develops between a French soldier and the Algerian freedom fighter who is his jailer, is an androgynous work of art that marries the personal and the political. So, too, the



'feminine' sentence that Saul gives Anna becomes the opening sentence of a fiction, *The Golden Notebook*, that both dissects and seeks to heal the destructive dichotomy of masculine and feminine.

To lay stress upon the vision of the androgynous artist in *The Golden Notebook* runs the risk of oversimplifying a rich and complex text. Almost certainly it is not an emphasis that Doris Lessing herself would approve. But there can hardly be a more striking exploration of the debates that still surround women's writing and the position of the woman writer.

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