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メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2010-07-29 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: Billingsley, P.R. メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://doi.org/10.24729/00011178

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Introduction

Women writers are generally considered more limited than, and therefore less interesting than men writers. There are also a lot less of them, which further reduces the range of choice for any student considering taking up women writers as a special field of study. The two contentions of this paper will be, first, that if there really are limits on the range of women's writing and on the number of women writers, there are also specific reasons for those limits; and second, that we unconsciously tend to approach literature using a "double standard" according to which writing by women is assessed in terms of values laid down by men.

Broadly speaking, men are not terribly happy when women start to write literature. At least three reasons can be suggested. The first is ideological: since women are basically considered to be the inferior sex, if women can write it means that *anyone* can. The value of writing itself is thereby decreased, and it ceases to be a high-prestige activity worthy of the efforts of men. (One is reminded of the TV ads for motorbikes in which a shot of a woman actually riding one is implicitly presented as proof that "anyone" can do so.) The second is psychological: the reluctance of many male

critics to accept women as writers is their fear of what will be written about them, that they will not be treated with the dignity they deserve (a justifiable fear, but one which would soon become unnecessary if they took a fresh look at themselves). The third reason is practical: women writing pose a threat to men's daily lifestyle because time spent writing is time taken off from housework. Since "women's place is in the home" they should not be in the library; if they are in the library, men have to stay home in their place. For all these reasons and more, men intellectuals have invented a variety of pretexts according to which women shouldn't write literature, and a number of ways to make sure that they don't write or that, if they do, they will not be taken seriously.

The best way to prevent women from writing would be simply to pass laws forbidding them to. One of the more promising aspects of the human condition, however, is that people who are forbidden to do something tend often to want to do it even more. Awkward characters are also likely to point out that the reason women can't write is that they're not allowed to. Much more practical, therefore, is to give women the nominal freedom to write but to simultaneously make it so difficult for them to do so that the majority of them abandon the attempt. If at the same time those who do venture into print can be demonstrated to lack the qualities of a "good" writer, implying that they should not be writing at all, the situation becomes ideal.

1. Why Women Don't Write

The fact that there are no laws forbidding women to write does not mean that they are completely free to do so.¹ There are a number of implicit restrictions on women's capacity to pursue a literary career which, though less binding than in earlier centuries,

have by no means disappeared altogether. Two of the major restrictions are economic stringency and lack of leisure. As Virginia Woolf puts it in her essay *A Room Of One's Own*, those 19th century classics *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Emma* were all written by women so poor that they could not afford to buy more than a few sheets of paper at a time, and the creative efforts of their authors—Charlotte and Emily Brontë and Jane Austen, respectively—frequently had to await the time when they could afford to buy more.² Although referred to usually as “middle-class women writers”, it would thus seem more appropriate to call them “women writers attached to middle-class men”, since they more or less completely lacked the means to support themselves financially.

As for the leisure which middle-class women are said to receive in return for their economic sacrifices, this was and remains largely a myth. Even middle-class women, though sometimes free from the chores of housework as well as from earning a living, are expected to be both physically and emotionally “available” for their families at all times. In short, women who marry, have children, have to look after husbands and fathers and so on simply have no *time* for creative work. Women are trained to put others’ needs before their own, to create the conditions in which *others*—sons, husbands, etc—can be successful by their own sacrifice. The following note from Virginia Woolf’s diary is starkly impressive because of its honesty :

Father’s birthday. He would have been 96...today; and could have been...but mercifully was not. His life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books;—inconceivable.³

It was no accident that many women writers were childless, while others remained silent for years, only beginning their writing

careers after their children were grown (for example, Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Gaskell, respectively). Men have even tried to “explain” the lack of women writers by suggesting that women have no need or perhaps even no ability to create art because they can create babies, when in fact the opposite is the case.

Access to materials or to the training necessary to become a writer have also played a large part in suppressing women’s writing, such as banning them from libraries or from higher education. Before all these, however, comes the “climate of expectation” which discourages women from even considering a writing career. Many a budding woman writer has been dashed on the rocks of destructive criticism (by men) or unsympathetic publishers, to say nothing of those whose talent was crushed in its infancy by scornful parents. The kind of female characters young girls are likely to meet in the novels they read further discourage them from considering a career in a “non-female” field like writing—how many novels, until recently, have featured women as writers? The image of themselves which women learn from literature and from their environment tells them that unless they lead a certain kind of life they’re not women at all, and the identity split which results has caused madness, even suicide in women writers as far apart as Virginia Woolf and the American poet Sylvia Plath.

Unfortunately, despite all the restrictions, some stubborn or particularly talented women do manage to get into print. On the other hand, there are various ways and means to belittle or ignore their achievement. One of the simplest is simply to deny that she wrote it—that is, that she in fact hired some man to write it for her, or that she added her name to a work anonymously penned by someone else (there was a persistent rumour, for example, that the works of Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë were really written by

their deceased brother Branwell). Since the truth is bound to come out in the end, however, this method is no more reliable than the curious but often-heard assertion that a book can "write the writer": *Wuthering Heights*, for example, has been said to have been less the creation of its author Emily Brontë than a powerful force in its own right which merely used her as a channel for expression. Thus the woman writer loses all the credit for her achievement. The same can be said of the third and most popular method, that of claiming that "the man inside the woman's body" wrote the work. While seeming to recognise her as creator, this method in fact attributes it to her "masculinity", which in effect makes it a man's achievement.

Another highly effective way to deal with women writers is to charge them with being no longer womanly through the fact of their having written a book. Women who are virtuous can't know enough about life to write a book, while women who know enough to write well can't be virtuous, so they still shouldn't write. Since in a man-dominated society women's existence is founded on their possession of virtue, to become unvirtuous amounts to denying their very existence. Although the tendency to condemn women writers as immoral has become more or less untenable nowadays, it has been replaced instead by the criticism of "unlovableness". A woman writer who lacks the "thrust" expected of a man writer is dismissed as spineless, while one who has it is rejected as "unwomanly"—either way, as writers women just can't win. A variation on this technique, first thought of by Rousseau but given extra sophistication by Freud, is to allege that the would-be woman writer is "trying to make herself into a man", and is not really a normal woman at all.

As well as condemning the author herself for daring to write a

book, there is also the technique of evaluating the book itself according to the author's sex. This is the "double standard" in literature, and there are several variations. One is to say that certain things are OK for a man to write, but impermissible for a woman. Positive assessments of the pseudonymously-written *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, for instance, soon turned to scurrilous criticism when critics learned that their authors were women. Another trick is to label one set of experiences as "valuable" and "important" compared with a different set. Since the world is dominated by men's values, it follows that men's experiences will be the ones given priority. Virginia Woolf once again sums up the situation clearly, noting that while a novel which deals with war—a male experience—is usually given high marks for its theme, one which deals with women in drawing rooms—even though, as in the case of Woolf's own *Mrs Dalloway*, the book may be implicitly concerned with the issue of war—is considered trivial⁴.

Yet another way of dismissing a writer's work by its contents is to hurl it into a literary category that is itself rated mediocre—such as regionalism. American novelists Kate Chopin and Willa Cather were both looked down upon as regional writers until recently because their works are set in specific parts of the USA, while their counterparts like William Faulkner, of whom exactly the same can be said, are praised nevertheless as great writers. The effect of the label is to hide any other characteristics that writer might have, with the result that only in the last ten years, some seventy years after her death, has Kate Chopin been given the recognition she deserves. Thanks to feminist critics she has been proved to be not only a penetrating realist critic of American capitalist society, but also a pioneer feminist in her attitude towards sex and her criticism of male attitudes. It surely is not necessary to explain why her

achievement was played down by male critics.⁵

Unfortunately for "phallic critics" ("phallic criticism" is the term invented by Mary Ellmann to describe the technique of assessing women's books by sexual standards),⁶ there are some women writers whose talent is too great to allow them to be denied or shunted into minor categories. This raises the danger of others holding them up as evidence of the fact that women can write as well as men, a very dangerous situation about which something must—and can—be done. One way is to seize upon one book by that writer and classify it as an isolated achievement, after which the rest of her work need not be considered. For example, the paperback shelves of bookshops contain cheap editions of almost anything written by major male writers, but with women writers it is difficult to find anything but the one isolated one—Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, for example. Usually the work selected is one which conforms to the notion of what women *should* write—while *Jane Eyre* is the story of an independent woman, in the end it is a love story with a happy ending; the author's other books, which also portray strong women but in less romantic ways are forgotten. Most students don't know that Charlotte Brontë wrote anything but *Jane Eyre*, and in the absence of cheap editions of the other books teachers are hampered from doing anything about it.

Not only can the individual woman writer be belittled for having written only one great work; women writers as a whole can be made light of by being constantly regarded as a minority. In anthologies of literature, for instance, women furnish only a tiny percentage of the writers included. Moreover, those who are selected tend to be only the most extraordinary ones, while in the case of men even those of relatively second-rate talent are often included. Here too we find the "double standard": while in the case of men

the principle seems to be to include as many writers as possible, with women it seems to be to include only those who cannot be left out. That is, women writers may be included *as well as* men, but *never instead of* men. If a large number of gifted female writers demand inclusion, the number of men must also be increased so as to maintain a steady percentage.

The effect of this “double standard” is startling: while the large number of men of varying talents gives the impression of a long and deep—rooted male literary culture, the minority of extraordinary women gives the impression that there was nobody else, that those writers did not grow out of a women’s tradition of writing, and that therefore their achievement was somehow unnatural. Indeed, the number of widely-known women writers since the 19th century could probably be counted on the fingers of both hands.

What is taking place here is a case of *tokenism*, the technique by which dominant groups manage to give the impression of sharing their power and privileges with minority or oppressed groups by allowing a small number of their representatives recognition, while making it impossible for the latter to effect any real change by restricting both their quantity and the nature of their recognition.⁷ In the case of women writers whose achievement has been recognised, by isolating them from any tradition of women’s writing and selecting only those aspects of their work which are not challenging to the values of male society, the literary establishment protects itself. If such writers were fully accepted, the tradition they belong to, so different from the male literary tradition, must also be accepted as equal. Standards of literary appreciation—what is “good” and “bad” writing—must also change. When this happens, the very idea that women incapable of writing as well as men collapses, and all the methods employed to justify their exclusion from the lit-

erary world are exposed as nothing but prejudice. The likelihood of these things happening as long as men are in control of literary values is extremely slender. That is why women will always be outside the main literary tradition as long as it is dominated by men, and why there is consequently a need for a *feminist literary criticism*.

2. Feminist Literary Criticism

Because both the writing and the appreciation of literature has been so dominated by male values, it could be said that literature itself had become largely a male phenomenon until recently ; not only in the sense that most of the “great” writers are male, but also because the view of life it expresses is predominantly male. By reading and absorbing what those male writers say—for example, about women—we ourselves become identified with the male viewpoint.

As the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir has said, women are always the “second sex”—that is, not men.⁸ The word “second” implies a vertical rather than a horizontal relationship to men. Men’s characteristics are normal, so women’s are different ; and since there must always be high and low, that means inferior. Women, in literature and in life, exist in terms of their relationship to a certain man ; in both cases they fulfil a certain role for the men nearest them—mother, wife, lover, sex-object, tempter, etc. What this means in effect is that such women have no subjectivity ; they are not people at all, but *stereotypes*. Women, that is, are passive objects, while men are active subjects.⁹

The words “hero” and “heroine”, while seeming to constitute merely male and female versions of the same thing, in fact reflect this aspect of the double standard. Each represents in effect the

ideal picture of what male society deems their sex should be : while heroes go out into the world to prove their manhood by taking their destiny into their own hands and challenging the dictates of reality, heroines stay home to await their return, keeping the home together, cheerfully standing up to their fate without giving in. The pattern is repeated so often that we come to assume it natural that a man be ambitious and successful, a woman supportive and grateful for what she receives. That is, we are caught up in a vicious circle : literature reflects the reality of a society in which women are not free to behave as they please, and society is in turn sustained by seeing itself confirmed in literature.¹⁰ Because women have until recently been unable to find a voice to make themselves heard, they have been unable to point out that the origin of that circle lies in men's one-sided control over social and literary values. The aim of feminist literary criticism is to expose those stereotypes, pointing out the close relationship between literature and society, and thereby suggesting an alternative way not only of looking at literature but also of arranging the world.¹¹

Adrienne Rich, the American radical feminist poet, has described what is happening nowadays in literary criticism as "when we dead awaken". In a poem titled "Re-vision" she writes: "the act of looking back/of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering/an old text from a new critical direction/. . . is an act of survival."¹² That is, to always deny one's own value, to see oneself through the eyes of people—men—by whom one is considered inferior as happens when women read literature amounts to no less than "psychic death". To survive, to save their own lives, women have to rediscover their own value by looking at their past and their present through their own eyes, not through those of men.

Out of the anxiety of feminists like Adrienne Rich has emerged

an entirely new way of looking at literature, an approach that emphasises women's unique vision and experience, and employs them to reassess the writing of both men and women.

Feminist literary criticism itself, however, is nothing new. At least as early as the 14th century Renaissance period a writer named Cristina de Pisan was criticising the image of women presented in "courtly love" romances, calling them no more than textbooks on how to seduce women, and insisting on women's equality with men. In 16th century England too a woman who called herself Jane Anger was criticising male writers for their lack of substance and attacking their portrayal of women, while a hundred years later Mary Wollstonecraft was sticking her neck out to condemn the sexist ideas in the work of both the English poet Milton and the French philosopher Rousseau. Virginia Woolf too was a strong critic of men's attitudes and a discoverer of forgotten women writers as well as the novelist she is more commonly known as, while Simone de Beauvoir was also a distinguished literary as well as social critic.¹⁸ Feminist literary criticism thus has its own tradition, though it was unable to find a voice until the great feminist movement of the 1970s.

Modern feminist literary criticism represents just one aspect of the feminist movement itself, a movement whose ultimate aim is to turn the values and the practice of sexist society upside-down. It begins from the assumption that women and men are equal, but that women have been assigned unequal roles in society because men's standards have become dominant. More than just a new way of looking at literature, it seeks to expose one specific area in which women's experience has been denied or distorted, and to inspire women to a new confidence in themselves.

In gaining acceptance for itself, however, feminist literary criticism has had to struggle extremely hard. When the culture of

previously-suppressed groups is rediscovered and reevaluated, it is usually assumed that all that is necessary is to allow a few individual writers into the literary canon, which thus becomes more complete without requiring any substantial reconsideration of the canon itself. In the case of women, however—while statistically outnumbering men women have been treated as a cultural minority—it is more complex. In other words, to ignore women as they have been ignored because they write about the lives of other women, to treat women writers' experiences as immaterial, to look at women only through men's eyes, is to ignore or distort the experience of half of humanity, experience which cannot be completely isolated from that of the other half, men. Such an approach to literature is not only incomplete but is also distorted; and the admission of women writers means not only an authentic approach to women but also an alternative look at men themselves.¹⁴ Reconsidering women, that is, implies that men too must be reconsidered. It is because they are unwilling to do this that male critics seek to ignore, belittle or even attack feminist literary criticism.

What the opponents of feminist literary criticism can not or will not see is that it does not seek to *replace* traditional literary criticism but to *join* it; that it offers not an exclusive view of literature, but an *alternative*, supplementary one. Feminist women seek to take their place *alongside* men, not over them, but many men, conditioned to think vertically not horizontally, can only conceive of a hierarchy in which one must be high, the other low—hence de Beauvoir's concept of the "second sex".

One of feminist literary criticism's fundamental difficulties has been that, lacking a clearly defined theory, it is wide open to attacks on the grounds that it is "not rigorous", that it "lacks universality" and so on. This, however, is to try to fit it into a framework

that is really the very opposite of what it stands for. In women's writing—including works by George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, and Doris Lessing¹⁵—the rational, rigorous, pompous, precise male intellectual has often been the butt of satire for his attempts to make universal, all-encompassing statements about a world of which he knows, after all, only half at most. Feminist literary critics, because they are first and foremost feminists, are unwilling to concentrate on developing a new theory merely to defend themselves against men when there are still so many substantial avenues to be explored, and particularly since the “real” nature of women and men has yet to be clearly defined.

However, even if there is as yet no definitive theory of feminist literary criticism, it is possible to divide it into two broad categories.¹⁶ The first category is concerned with the woman as reader. Women, especially feminist women, with different experiences and perceptions from men, can also read a book in a different way; they can see things which men cannot see because they take them for granted, particularly the way that book treats women and their relations with men. This approach may be called the Feminist Critique. By identifying the stereotyped images of women in men's writing, as explained above, and linking those stereotypes to society, history and psychology, the nature of men's dominance over women can be exposed and women's consciousness of their situation raised.¹⁷

Recently, however, this sort of criticism has begun to be referred to as “beating a dead pig”—the “pig” being of the male chauvinist breed—since what is written cannot be changed. This sort of approach cannot be the last word in feminist literary criticism, chiefly because it focusses either on men—male authors, male characters—or on the women who are victims of men. To effectively criticise the way women are treated by D.H. Lawrence or Ernest Hemingway, for

instance, involves spending a great deal of time studying that author's work. There is also the danger that what began as an attack on men will turn into self-pity, or that studying the victimisation of women will merely strengthen the conception of women as victims. Above all, for feminists to spend so much time studying male authors when they've already been studied by men for years seems not only ironic but also a waste of time.

Consequently, instead of focussing on men and their female victims, many feminist critics have begun to suggest that the time could be spent more usefully by focussing on unknown or forgotten women writers, or by drawing attention to cases in which women are not victims but independent heroines and so on. This is the second category of feminist literary criticism, sometimes referred to as "gynocritics". It concentrates on woman as *writer* not as reader, and its themes include the appreciation of neglected writers; common patterns of women's writing such as in narrative technique, language and subject matter; the relationship between writers' lives and their work; and the construction of a women's literary tradition.¹⁸

One important task of gynocritics is to give women writers the same degree of critical attention given to men. Many writings by women, as has been said, are ignored or under-rated because the hero is a woman or because the setting or style do not fit the standards laid down by men. Virginia Woolf is criticised because there is "no action"; Kate Chopin is ignored because her hero leaves her husband and seeks her full independence; Adrienne Rich's poetry was highly rated until she began writing political and feminist poems, after which she suddenly became regarded as a nonentity. That is, any woman who writes a book that men can't empathise with is ignored or rated according to qualities which men can understand. Gynocritics seeks to restore the balance, drawing

attention to previously-invisible themes that illustrate valuable parts of women's experience: friendships among women, relationships between mothers and daughters, lesbian love affairs, women and madness, etc.¹⁹

In the reconstruction of a women's literary tradition, too, gynocritics have been active, starting from the feminist assumption that the everyday lives of women and men, and the ways of thinking and behaviour that result, are so different as to constitute in effect two distinct cultures. Up to now male culture has been the dominant mode, and female culture more or less invisible in literature. Gynocritics sets out to make female culture visible by going beyond the distorted image of women's literary history created by male critics, to create, as one feminist critic has called it, "a literature of their own".²⁰

Instead of trying to fit women into a literary history designed by men, gynocritics are creating a new history using the criteria of the feminist movement. One of those criteria is that there are no "superstars"; another is that, since women form a more or less separate culture of their own, women's writing too must reflect that culture. Rewriting women's literary tradition therefore means going beyond the so-called Great Writers and focussing on the other, "lesser" writers who were writing at the same time. In this way, instead of seeing women writers as isolated from one another and from the literary tradition itself, it becomes possible to distinguish connections, friendships between writers of the same generation and those of one generation and the next. The result is the discovery of a women's literary tradition very different from that put forward by men: one which, far from consisting of no more than a few superstars with no visible connections to anyone else, has been sustained over the centuries by the activities of women themselves just as has

that of men.²¹ The work of mining that rich vein of literature has only just begun.

The search for a "female style" has also been pursued strongly. While not suggesting that women are less varied in their writing styles than men, gynocritics re-read women's writing for possible patterns which distinguish it from that of men, and which might be related to the women's experience itself—Virginia Woolf's "stream of consciousness" technique has been suggested as a possible example.

Certain images have also been pointed out by gynocritics as growing out of women's experience—that of the mirror, for example, which appears constantly in women's writing.²² Women have been judged by their surface appearance for so long that a mirror has become an essential part of a woman's everyday life. Whereas male writers tend to portray women as admiring their own beauty before a mirror, however, women writers such as Virginia Woolf show what is really true: that a woman who checks her face and appearance in a mirror is really confirming her very *identity*, the face she presents to the world, prior to going out into that world. Doris Lessing has written ironically about women who neglect to consult a mirror before venturing outside, and who are consequently ignored or unnoticed.²³ The woman who knows she is beautiful is rarely found in writing by women.²⁴

Other critics have sought to identify certain symbols which seem to originate in women's physical experience, such as birth images, the frequent occurrence of the colour red representing menstrual blood, and so on.²⁵ The fact that it has become possible to draw attention to such matters hitherto unmentionable is one of the clearest indications of how far feminism and feminist literary criticism have come towards creating an entirely new identity for women. The emergence of gynocritics out of the feminist critique, that is, was a

sign that feminist critics had finally managed to shake off the legacy of male-centred literary criticism and set about the work of establishing a new set of standards for assessing literature.

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 14. See Russ, op cit, 110-11.
 15. Respectively, *Middlemarch*, *The Lighthouse*, *The Golden Notebook*.
 16. The following discussion follows lines set out by Elaine Showalter in her essays "Towards A Feminist Poetics" in Mary Jacobus ed, *Women Writing and Writing About Women* (Croom Helm, 1979), 22-41, and "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" in Elizabeth Abel ed, *Writing and Sexual Difference* (University of Chicago Press, 1982), 9-35.
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 21. Showalter, "Feminist Criticism", 27ff.
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24. Russ, op cit, 111-12.
25. See Moers, op cit, 369-401.

