

Celebrating women's writing: the pen in their hands

In the 1980s feminism changed the study of literature forever when it challenged what we term the 'canon' of literature: the list of names we accord a kind of 'sainthood' in our histories of literature. Up until then, the names were those of men, usually white, aristocratic or middle class. Women scholars observed that it was not that women had not been writing poetry, fiction, and prose as long as men had, but that they had not received the same recognition or circulation. They had disappeared from or been written out of history, partly because so much of that history had been written by men. As Jane Austen's heroine Anne Eliot puts it in *Persuasion* (1818): 'Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands.' As women took the pen in their hands - as literary critics and historians - they started to look for women writers and find them. And those discoveries changed the story itself of the history of literature. Feminists not only found women writing in many genres, they also found them telling new stories about women's lives and feelings, writing critically about the way that men had represented the female sex, imagining worlds in which sexual difference made no difference.

In the process of what we now call 'recovery' (of the many works by women produced through history and across many cultures), feminist critics also challenged the ways that we understand literature to be 'great': the vocabulary we use and the way we apply it to particular works and writers. It is not that works by men are more 'objective' or 'universal' in their treatment of their subject. But that critics and readers see male writers and readers as 'universal', while they interpret women as 'different' and 'other'. So, women writers are always marked by their gender in a way that male aren't. This is why the Brontë sisters published their first fictional works in 1847 under pseudonyms that did not mark them as female: Currer (Charlotte), Ellis (Emily) and Acton (Anne) Bell:

"the ambiguous choice being dictated by a sort of conscientious scruple at assuming Christian names positively masculine, while we did not like to declare ourselves women, because - without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called 'feminine' - we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice" (Charlotte Brontë, 'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell,' published with 1850 edition of Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*).

Prejudice would mean - not that the work was not published - but rather that it would not be judged in terms other than expectations shaped by the knowledge of the sex of the authors. Indeed, popularity and success can count against women when judging the value of the literary. In 2017 only one male writer made the top 10 list of bestselling literary authors of 2017 in the UK. But men still dominate in winning prizes for the 'best' works of literature (the 2019 joint award of the Booker Prize to Margaret Atwood and Bernadine Evaristo was an unusual turnaround) and 'women's fiction' is a disparaging term for works by women targeted at female readers about female life experience.

In making what we call 'counter-canons' of women writers, feminist critics needed also to recognise that they too could inscribe forms of prejudice and exclusions. A double prejudice attended the earliest writing by women of colour. One of the earliest was Phyllis Wheatley (1753-1784), who was born in West Africa and sold into slavery when she was about seven years old. The first name she was given is that of the ship that brought her to Boston, America and her surname that of the Boston family that bought her. Her *Pomes on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was published in 1773 and much admired. She was set free shortly after the book was published, and she married but sadly died in poverty. Her book of poems was published with a frontispiece that shows her in her maidservant's dress, her pen resting on the paper on which she composes her poetry.

Phyllis Wheatley's book includes a poem addressed to another black African slave artist, Scipio Moorhead, the man who drew the picture on the frontispiece. She calls on him to pursue, like her, his aesthetic ambitions:

Still, wond'rous youth! each noble path pursue,
On deathless glories fix thine ardent view:
Still may the painter's and the poet's fire
To aid thy pencil, and thy verse conspire!

Phyllis' compliment to Scipio - that his gifts as a poet and his gifts as a painter, should conspire to allow him to pursue his ambition to achieve immortal fame as an artist - is also a call for him to conspire with her, to imagine community.

Community with other writers in the past and in the present is important. It gives a sense of tradition to imitate and to challenge. Feminist criticism has aimed to enable that sense of community for women as writers and readers. As the example of Phyllis Wheatley shows, that community can be found across as well as within gender lines, but it is only enabling when it rests on a sense of equality. You can read more about the emergence of feminist criticism and feminist approaches to literature, in an essay by Kate O'Connor on 'Feminist Approaches to Literature' on this site (<http://writersinspire.org/content/feminist-approaches-literature> [1]). In that essay, you will find links to a variety of resources in 'Great Writers Inspire' made by critics at Oxford University which introduce you to arguments about:

- - the work of key women writers in English - some familiar such as Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf; some less so, such as Aphra Behn and Mary Leapor;
- - about linguistic approaches to analysing gender difference in language;
- - about the representation of women by men - in Shakespeare's plays, in Jonathan Swift's and Thomas Hardy's poetry.

We continue to grow our resources and information about women's writing, especially contemporary literature. Women writing today are engaging with some of the most urgent issues for our global future: migration, climate change, conflicts of class and race, technological transformations of AI. And they are experimenting in art forms beyond and between writing: performance poetry, intertextual hybrids of visual and verbal art, virtual and material forms. Here are some (new) resources you might want to explore. We hope they will give you a sense of the richness and variety of women's creativity.

- - Writers Make Worlds (<https://writersmakeworlds.com/> [2]) introduces you to seven Black and Asian female writers in Britain today and invites you to explore key works and themes with them. You can watch the videos of the Great Writers Inspire at Home 2017 workshops <https://writersmakeworlds.com/about-the-project/great-writers-inspire-ho...> [3]. Here, contemporary British writers discuss how literature in different genres shapes readers' perceptions of the

- contemporary world, and their identities within it. Authors included are: Patience Agbabi, Moniza Alvi, Vahni Capildeo, Selma Dabbagh, Reni Eddo-Lodge, Diana Evans, Bernardine Evaristo, Amniatta Forna, Xiaolu Guo, Sarah Howe, Mimi Khalvati, Andrea Levy, Nadifa Mohamed, Helen Oyeyemi, Kamila Shamsie, Warsan Shire, Zadie Smith, D-Empress Dianne Regisford.
- - Dr Adriana Jacobs, poet and academic in the Faculty of Oriental Studies at Oxford, has a podcast series called 'Staying Alive' (<https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/staying-alive-poetry-and-crisis> [4]) . Here she interviews contemporary poets about how poets address crisis. Adriana interviews a number of women poets and writers (from the UK, the US, Israel, Trinidad) who talk about the many forms survival can take in their work from surviving domestic crisis and global financial crises to the metaphorical resonance of representations of post-apocalyptic zombie invasions.
- - In October 2019, Alice Oswald took up the post of Professor of Poetry at Oxford. The post was established in 1708. Professor Oswald is the first woman to have delivered lectures as the Professor of Poetry. Her lectures invite us to think of poets as those who are receptive to the quiet sounds of the world, who 'erode' their own voices and identities. You can listen to her lectures through English Faculty podcasts here. <http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/professor-poetry> [5]
- - Professor Ros Ballaster, Faculty of English at Oxford, has added resources to Great Writers Inspire on Maria Edgeworth, Anglo-Irish writer of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, a bestseller of her time and inspiring author of educational treatises and children's fiction. <http://writersinspire.org/writers/maria-edgeworth> [6]

READING

Elaine Showalter, 'Toward a Feminist Poetics' (1979 in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory* (London: Virago, 1985)/

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar eds., *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English* (1985)

Barbara Smith, 'Toward a Black Feminist Criticism' (1977), rpt in Elaine Showalter ed., *The New Feminist Criticism* (1985)

Deborah McDowell, 'New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism' (1980), rpt in Elaine Showalter ed., *The New Feminist Criticism* (1985)

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Links

[1] <http://writersinspire.org/content/feminist-approaches-literature>

[2] <https://writersmakeworlds.com/>

[3] <https://writersmakeworlds.com/about-the-project/great-writers-inspire-home-workshops/>

[4] <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/staying-alive-poetry-and-crisis>

[5] <http://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/professor-poetry>

[6] <http://writersinspire.org/writers/maria-edgeworth>