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THE GREAT LIE, OR THE CASE OF THE LOST WOMEN

Soňa Nováková

No one should have to dance backwards all
their life.

Jill Johnson

I. THE LITERARY CANON: A RE-EVALUATION

Canon = the list of books of the Bible
accepted by the Christian church as
genuine and inspired.

Oxford English Dictionary

We could all without doubt list the great writers who, according to the established standards of judgement and taste, are considered major, and hence are deemed worthy of being studied. The literary canon and its implications for the generally accepted criteria of excellence are simply absorbed by the student in the course of education without anyone's ever seeming to question the concept of "canonicity". Certain works become strongly institutionalized as canonical literature through their habitual teaching and study. Students and scholars gradually become so accustomed to the "institution" of the literary canon that they are hardly aware of it. The "authority" of the literary canon is deeply embedded in us.

The literary canon is not a wholly finite body. There is some movement inside it, with individual admissions and promotions from minor to major status happening every once in a while. Nearly every new literary critical theory has brought certain changes into the canon by emphasizing the importance of some writers over others, the most famous case being F. R. Leavis's "Great Tradition". But until now none have really challenged

the concept of the literary canon and the aesthetic standards that go along with it.

For more than a decade now, feminist scholars have been protesting against the apparently systematic neglect of women's experience in the literary canon, neglect that takes the form of distorting and misreading the few recognized female writers and excluding the others.

Feminist literary scholarship has been characterized by the reappraisal of forgotten or undervalued women writers and their work. It is concerned with discovering the existence and establishing the significance of a specifically female literary tradition set beside the "Great Tradition".[1] Thus, an alternative complex, a female "counter-canon", has come into being.

However, the new counter-canon formed by the feminist scholars may run the risk of further separating male and female writers and pushing women into greater isolation. To combat this, some feminists claim women's right to be represented in the literary canon. In order to gain admission for the literature by women and to fully incorporate them into the established canon, the canon must be opened to a much larger number of voices. Only thus can true equity be attained.

Needless to say, this complex endeavour brings basic aesthetic questions to the foreground and presents a challenge to the particular notions of literary quality, timelessness, universality, and other qualities that constitute the rationale for canonicity.

The existing criteria themselves tend to exclude women, and hence should be modified or replaced.[2] For example, the feminists challenge the fundamentally "élitist" nature of the existing canon, which denigrates "popular" genres. Domestic and sentimental fiction, the female Gothic, the women's sensational novel, romance literature, all these have been studied, without embarrassment, by feminists as part of the female literary tradition. Due to this serious scholarship it is no longer automatically assumed that literature addressed to the mass female audience is

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[1] Some of the important feminist works re-evaluating women writers are Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* (which centres the argument for a female tradition on the concept of heroinism), Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (which traces the female tradition as embodied in the domestic and sensational fiction of the nineteenth century), and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (which focuses on the theme of literary creation itself).

[2] The problem is expressed by Nina Baym:

> "... I cannot avoid the belief that purely literary criteria, as they have been employed to identify the best American works, have inevitably had a bias in favor of things male — in favor of, say, a whaling ship, rather than a sewing circle as a symbol of the human community ..." (Nina Baym, *Women's Fiction: A Guide to Novels by and about Women in America, 1820—70*, Ithaca, 1978, pp. 14—15; quoted in Elaine Showalter, ed., *The New Feminist Criticism*, p. 110.)

necessarily bad. Feminist critics insist that this work ought to be placed beside "high" art as part of the integrated literary tradition, and thus they challenge all received sense of appropriate style.

II. FILLING IN THE GAPS: THE WOMEN LOST AND FOUND

The history of mankind is the history of repeated injuries and usurpations on the part of man toward woman, having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over her.

"Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions" of the First Women's Rights Convention in America, Seneca Falls, 1848, written by Elizabeth Cady Stanton

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.

Anne Elliot in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*

Suppressing the history of women's writing has left large and mysterious gaps in the account of literary history, e.g. in the development of the genre of the novel. How long have we been presented with the distorted version of the birth of the novel in the eighteenth century solely in terms of men, with no mention made of women's achievements in this particular field. This is a serious underestimation of the role of women. The rise of the novel cannot be understood fully without considering how its conventions were shaped by the contributions of a large number of women. There is a great heritage of women novelists of whom most of us have never heard before, whose existence we have not even suspected.[3] And there is another piece of received wisdom to challenge: that for women novelists it all started with Jane Austen. The truth is that Jane Austen was the inheritor of a long and well-established tradition of professional women novelists. Yet this tradition, and the women that were part of it, have so faded from view as to be quite unknown. Now we must reclaim this lost tradition.

For too long have we been given a literary canon dominated by males, with an odd woman here and there. For too long has the story of the early novel been presented exclusively in male terms. Patriarchal literary history has largely written women out of its story of eighteenth-century

[3] Dale Spender in *Mothers of the Novel* talks of "100 good women writers before Jane Austen".

fiction.[4] It is time to focus on the achievement of women. But I believe that feminist literary history should not fall into the same faulty procedure in reversed terms. It is not correct to attempt to entirely separate female writing from the complex web of mutually influencing female and male writing of any period. "The novel as a genre has both fathers and mothers".[5]

We must bear in mind that if we are presented with a purely male novelistic tradition it is not because women did not write, could not get published, or went unacclaimed. The majority of novels published in the eighteenth century were written by women. And most of these women were highly esteemed in their own lifetime. Only later were they dismissed from literary history and their importance denied. Eighteenth-century periodical reviewers, who tended to have a rather low opinion of the genre of the novel, emphasized and sometimes even exaggerated its connection with women writers and readers. Modern critics, whose respect for the novel is much greater, usually concentrate on five male "great" novelists — Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollett and Laurence Sterne. Gradually, as the novel gained critical prestige, the part of women in its development has been belittled, and, in the end, completely forgotten.[6]

One question still remains unanswered: Why have we come to lose this knowledge about so many good women writers? The most obvious answer would seem to be that if there are "no women to be found among the early 'greats' it would undoubtedly be because they have not written anything 'great' ".[7]

> "Not all that is written could be preserved; not all that is written is worth preserving. ... Of the approximately two thousand novels that were written during the eighteenth century,[8] only a very few have been preserved and passed on in the literary canon. This in itself is no cause for complaint. But when to this is added the information that about half these novels were written by women[9] and *all* of them have since failed the test of greatness, then explanations are required."

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[4] This writing is exemplified in Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), Walter Allen's *The English Novel* (1954), and more recently, Michael McKeon's *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600—1740* (1987). When, for instance, Ian Watt comes to outline the history of the early novel, he acknowledges that the majority of eighteenth-century novels were written by women, but does not consider them important enough to deal with.

[5] Janet Todd, *The Sign of Angellica*, p. 2.

[6] This process can be traced in the movement in literary pseudonyms. In the eighteenth century it was not unknown for men to masquerade as female authors in order to obtain greater chances of publication. By the 1840s literary women accepted male pen-names to counter the anti-female bias of literary critics.

[7] The following argument is taken from Dale Spender, *Mothers of the Novel*, p. 119. I have included it for its simple, "commonsensical", reasoning.

Do the laws of probability need revision? Is it pure coincidence that has been responsible for the disappearance of more than one hundred good women novelists in favour of five men?

Of course many male writers have fallen into oblivion with the passage of time. But not one hundred of them over a century. Not virtually all of them. And not those who were widely acclaimed in their own time. Enough men are retained to allow for an uninterrupted tradition of men writers. The same is not true for women.

Eighteenth-century women's novels have never found their way into the "great tradition" of English literature because they do not conform to the dominant male aesthetics, which denigrates the sentimental and moralistic. Many of them are what would later be termed "popular", though perhaps not mass, fiction, written for an audience known to have had little or no formal education and limited in what they could read and should think, i.e. women. But it is simply not true that the women writers of the eighteenth century were all "just" sensational and sentimental and were read only by frivolous women who had nothing better to do than spend their time on "escapist" literature. This concept is a product of a systematic devaluation of women's writing. "Women's novels" today are closely associated with a mass audience and are referred to as romance. Because now they are held in such low repute, many women's novels of the past have been retrospectively deprived of their true merit.

The novels of the eighteenth-century women writers are necessary for an understanding of female consciousness and in this light have immense social and historical value as the first large body of imaginative writing by women in England. By including the perspective of women, who are, after all, half of the population, in a more fully representative literature, we will know more about the culture as it actually was, to say nothing of the critical importance to women's literary history of the women who intruded upon an intellectual sphere so far dominated by men of letters, there proved their capacities, and thus first gained for women a public voice in literature.

The problem remains by what aesthetic principles to judge these novels. According to traditional literary critical standards most are intrusively autobiographical, self-indulgent, conventional in style, and fail to meet the established criteria, particularly the "complexity" criteria, of good

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[8] "The annual production of works of fiction, which had averaged only about seven in the years between 1700 and 1740, rose to an average of about twenty in the three decades following 1740, and the output was doubled in the period from 1770 to 1800." (Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, p. 290.)

[9] This in fact is the lowest estimate because it actually was the *majority* of novels that were written by women.

art. What does this judgement imply? Do these novels assert "outmoded" values, which, nonetheless, still appear seductive in modern mass fiction? Or does this judgement occur because our critical assumptions have been influenced by a particular body of male literature and literary criticism? We must be aware that valuing the ironic and the unified literary work over the sentimental and diffuse, as well as the assumption of a timeless aesthetic against which all art can be measured, is a historically determined judgement.

Yet, although it is historically conditioned, I believe that the aesthetic remains a useful category which can accommodate a lot of eighteenth--century women's writing. The fiction of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays and Frances Brooke can be judged immensely interesting for the history of female consciousness; the novels of Sarah Fielding, Fanny Burney, Ann Radcliffe, and others, remain great works of art.

III. THE RETURN OF THE WOMEN: AN ACT OF IMPORTANCE

Establishment of Truth depends on destruction
of Falsehood continually...

William Blake, *Jerusalem*

... it is natural for the sexes to co-operate.
One has a profound, if irrational, instinct in
favour of the theory that the union of man and
woman makes for the greatest satisfaction, the
most complete happiness.

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Does it matter to generations of women and men that the early women writers have been removed from the literary heritage? What difference can it make to writers and readers to know that women as well as men participated in the conception and development of the new genre — the novel? How does our sense of literary history change when the work of women is not merely added but fully incorporated into "the" literary tradition?

The answers depend on the role and importance that is attached to tradition, but I think we would all agree that the cultural heritage of the past has a great influence on the attitudes and values of the present. The reinstatement of the achievement of women, the knowledge of the contribution of women to culture, could make a significant difference to the judgements and practices of the whole society.

One world view — the view of the men in power — is simply not enough to provide a full understanding of the way the world works: it is too limited. Women can see much that men, because of their position, cannot. And so to reclaim and revalue women writers is "to do more than

challenge the biased version of literary history: it is to take a political stand and to challenge the propaganda of dictatorship".[10]

The nearly six hundred novels written by more than one hundred women novelists in the eighteenth century contain a record of women's consciousness, a documentation of women's experience as subordination in a male-dominated society. These women writers are the bearers of women's traditions. They were vitally important to women in their own time. They are perhaps even more significant for the women *and* men of today.

Since we have been barred admission to the texts of these women, the priority today is to "re-present" some of these writers and their work to contemporary readers. Janet Todd, Jane Spencer, Dale Spender, and others are doing just that for the English-speaking scholarly and general public.

The feminists' struggle for the recognition of the achievement of women is slowly beginning to bear fruit. Pandora Press is reprinting eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels written by women. Each novel is "re-introduced" to readers today by a contemporary woman novelist. Penguin Paperbacks publish a whole series of *Virago Modern Classics.* Their 1989 Paperback Catalogue includes more than 75 titles by authors like Aphra Behn, Fanny Burney, Sarah Scott and others. Oxford University Press's *The World Classics* series is also beginning to include more and more women writers of the past.

In these books a whole new world is opened up for the reader; a new dimension is added to literary study for the scholar. Only by taking fully into consideration the female literary tradition can one appreciate the subtle interweavings that are the substance of all literary traditions. The complex labyrinth of mutual influencing slowly comes to light.

For Fanny Burney, Eliza Haywood's *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* (1751) was an inspirational model for Evelina (1778). Charlotte Smith, Elizabeth Inchbald, Amelia Opie and Mary Brunton praised Frances Sheridan and declared her *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761, 1767) their favourite reading and a great influence on their work. This is more than her own son, Richard Brinsley Sheridan, did. Many of the scenes from her novel are to be found, unacknowledged, in his play *The School for Scandal.* Jane Austen's heroine in *Northanger Abbey* (1818), Catherine Morland, follows in the footsteps of Charlotte Lennox's Arabella (*The Female Quixote,* 1752). In Elizabeth Inchbald's *A Simple Story* (1791) one can see the precursor of Jane Eyre. Many, many more examples could be listed.

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[10] Dale Spender, *Mothers of the Novel,* p. 144. This is the argument of many feminists, e.g. Kate Millett and Adrienne Rich. For the connections between women's cultural poverty and women's material poverty see Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own.*

Feminist critics have acknowledged the importance of these writers for literary history. They have helped to remake their literary reputations and fought for the place in literary canon these authors deserve to have. By bringing these lost women back into the literary tradition they have at last enabled us to comprehend literature in all its human dimensions.

APPENDIX

The following is a list of some of the eighteenth-century women novelists. I have not attempted to enumerate all of them or all of their work. Such a project would demand the space of a whole book, as Janet Todd has proved with her *Dictionary of British and American Women Writers, 1660—1800.* I have concentrated only on those newly appraised ones who are mostly the objects of feminist scrutiny.

Penelope AUBIN (1679—1731) puts the emphasis upon morality in her fiction, e.g. *The Life of Charlotta du Pont* (1723).

Frances BROOKE's (1724—1789) *The History of Emily Montague* (1766) is considered the first Canadian novel.

Mary DAVYS (1674—1732) is part of the literary didactic tradition, e.g. *The Reform'd Coquet* (1724).

Sarah FIELDING (1710—1768) wrote *The Adventures of David Simple* (1744) in the picaresque tradition. The moralistic tale of *The Governess* (1749) is one of the earliest books for children.

Mary HAYS's (1760—1843) *The Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796) is a passionate plea for female emotional emancipation.

Eliza HAYWOOD's (1693—1756) *Love in Excess* (1719) was one of the three most popular novels before 1740 (together with *Gulliver's Travels* and *Robinson Crusoe*). *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless* (1751) is a moral tale in the realistic tradition.

Elizabeth INCHBALD (1753—1821) challenges the fundamental assumptions behind the didactic tradition in *A Simple Story* (1791).

Sophia LEE (1750—1824) attempted to seriously recreate a historical period in her Gothic novel *The Recess* (1783—1785).

Charlotte LENNOX's (1720, 1727, 1729, 1730?—1804) *The Life of Harriot Stuart* (1750) is sometimes considered to be the first American novel. *The Female Quixote* (1752) is a comic satire on romances.

Mary Delarivière MANLEY's (1663—1724) *The New Atalantis* (1709) is an erotic roman à clef containing scandalous allegations about prominent Whigs.

Hannah MORE (1745—1833) was a religious writer and moralist. Her novel *Coelebs in Search of a Wife* (1809) describes a model wife.

Duchess of NEWCASTLE, Margaret Cavendish (1623—1673) was the first Englishwoman to publish extensively on a variety of subjects. Her finest work is the biography of her husband, *The Life of the Thrice Noble, High and Puissant Prince William Cavendish, Duke, Marquess, and Earl of Newcastle* (1667).

Sarah Scott (1723—1795) invented a female utopia in *A Description of Millenium Hall* (1762).

Frances SHERIDAN's (1724—1766) *The Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761) is a witty love story in the sentimental tradition.

Charlotte SMITH (1749—1806) provides a reconsideration of the seduction theme in her immensely popular sentimental novel *Emmeline* (1788). Love plays an important part in another of her novels, *The Old Manor House* (1793).

Mary WOLLSTONECRAFT (1759—1797) was an important feminist thinker and polemical writer. Her most famous work is the passionate argument for women's equality with men, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Her two novels, *Mary, A Fiction* (1788) and the posthumously published unfinished *The Wrongs of Women* (1798) are radical attacks on the ideal of feminity.

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VELKÁ LEŽ, ANEB PŘÍPAD ZTRACENÝCH ŽEN

Článek se zabývá teoretickými i praktickými otázkami přehodnocení literárního kánonu z hlediska feministické literární teorie. Poukazuje na nedostatečné zastoupení žen v anglickém literárním kánonu, konkrétně spisovatelek z 18. století, jejichž přínos pro rozvoj anglického románu byl tradiční literární historií zanedbáván. Začlenění žen do literárního kánonu a přiznání jejich významné úlohy v literární tradici staví do popředí estetické otázky. Je nutné prozkoumat platnost „nadčasových" estetických kritérií, která nepřiznávají literární kvality populárním ženským žánrům sentimentální a romantické literatury. Stovka neprávem zapomenutých spisovatelek a jejich romány přinášejí novou perspektivu pohledu na život a společnost 18. století, perspektivu „druhé" poloviny lidstva, která byla dosavadní patriarchální literární tradicí opomíjena.