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Women Writers in American Literary History

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Introducing a volume of Edith Wharton criticism in the 1960's, Irving Howe repeated Edmund Wilson's earlier plea for the recognition of Wharton as an important American author. Howe noted that her work has received some critical attention and that some of her books are still in print. "But," Howe wrote, "if one judges by the treatment she receives in our standard literary histories, the attention given her in the universities, the influence she exerts upon present-day writers, the feelings serious literary people are likely to have about their faded memories of her novels – then justice has not yet come to Edith Wharton."[1] Judging by the presentation of women writers in representative twentieth century literary histories and anthologies of American literature, Howe's assessment of Wharton's fate is applicable to other women writers as well: Justice has not yet come to them.

Women writers are conspicuously under-represented in even the more encyclopedic American literary histories. It is the same small group which appears in volume after volume – Anne Bradstreet, Emily Dickinson and a few more recent poets and novelists. Dickinson is the only woman to hold a place in that magic inner-circle of major American authors. The reader is never in any doubt that the female contribution to American letters has been slight. This impression is strengthened by the omission of women writers from whole periods of American literary history.

More pernicious than the exclusion of women writers is the treatment accorded to the few women who are included in representative histories and anthologies of American literature. Although these works represent widely divergent conceptions of an essential American literary tradition as well as widely divergent critical approaches

to literature, the presentation of women writers is monotonously the same. With only minor modifications, each successive work repeats the argument of the last about the nature and significance of each woman's work. It is clear that the re-evaluation of women writers has not been part of the literary or ideological programs these histories and anthologies often represent: Women's writing exists as a stagnant backwater, necessary to include, yet completely withdrawn from the more vital and dynamic currents of American literary and cultural life. Two tacit assumptions seem to be operative. First, that there are two separate literatures, one for women and one for men. Secondly, that women's literature is a static phenomenon which does not deal with the kinds of literary and ideological issues that make men's writing controversial. There are a number of other assumptions, as well, which indicate that women writers have been targets of what Elaine Showalter wittily calls "ad feminam criticism" and what Mary Ellmann, with greater indignation, designates as "phallic criticism."[2] The primary distinctions are sexual rather than literary. The fundamental assumption is that women are defined by their relationships with men. This assumption has a number of consequences for the perception of women's writing.

The story of women's contribution to American literature begins invariably with Anne Bradstreet. Equally invariable is the information that she was the daughter of Thomas Dudley, the wife of Simon Bradstreet, and the mother of eight children. Among her descendants have been Richard Henry Dana, Wendell Phillips and Oliver Wendell Holmes. That she wrote poetry seems to be incidental to her pedigree. This characteristic tendency sometimes reaches absurd proportions (for example when Norman Foerster introduces Katherine Anne Porter as the great-great-great-granddaughter of Daniel Boone[3]).

The significance of this preoccupation with personal relationships becomes clear in various critics' attempts to account for Emily Dickinson's poetry. The Dickinson biographical myth, which has always threatened to take precedence over an interest in her work, is extremely complicated. In its simplest form, it portrays Dickinson as a shy, white-clad recluse who renounced an unattainable lover – or was rejected by him – and spent the rest of her life in her bedroom writing poetry. Basically, there are three variations on this theme in Dickinson criticism. John Crowe Ransom emphasizes the romantic interest: "Most probably the poems would not have

amounted to much if the author had not finally had her own romance, enabling her to fulfill herself like any other woman."[4] John Cody emphasizes the compensatory aspect. If Dickinson had had a more adequate mother, he argues, she would probably have adopted a conventional woman's role as wife and mother:

> The creative potentiality would of course still have been there, but would she have discovered it? What motivation to write could have replaced the incentive given by suffering and loneliness? ....Would art have sprung from fulfillment gratification, and completeness as abundantly as it did from longing, frustration, and deprivation?[5]

Edwin Cady, Frederick Hoffman and Roy Harvey Pearce, editors of *The Growth of American Literature*, argue that the source of Dickinson's art lay in her transcendence of her deprivation:

> The meaning and the greatness of her life thus lie in the fact that she triumphed over the wounds of fate and despair to live the life of spiritual and esthetic adventure which made her poetry possible ... The alternative for her would have been to go the church-social, calling-card way of Amherst ladies with their "dimity convictions," and so not to be Emily Dickinson at all.[6]

Here, in a nutshell, we see one of the consistent qualities of feminine stereotypes which Mary Ellmann has so admirably analyzed. This consistent quality is the attempt to move women in two directions away from a premised, but undefined, human center making them either more than, or less than, "human." As Ellmann has pointed out, this involves two moral judgements, the first being that women are unfortunately women while men only become men with effort, the second that women achieve their ideal condition by rising above themselves while men achieve theirs by simply becoming and remaining men. According to Cady, *et al.*, Dickinson managed that difficult transcendence. The other women of Amherst are treated to a cheerful contempt of the-ladies-bless-them variety.

Of greater importance, however, for an understanding of the pervasive under-evaluation of women writers is the assumption that women's literature arises either as a response to "female fulfillment" or as compensation for the lack of it. That artistic achievement itself could constitute a woman's fulfillment is a possibility the scholars apparently have not entertained. The praise Dickinson elicits from Cady, *et al.* is very hollow indeed. Dickinson, they write, is "the only major American woman poet, perhaps the greatest woman poet who ever lived." The need to qualify "poet" with "woman" indicates that she is not really in the running at all. Furthermore, in

to literature, the presentation of women writers is monotonously the same. With only minor modifications, each successive work repeats the argument of the last about the nature and significance of each woman's work. It is clear that the re-evaluation of women writers has not been part of the literary or ideological programs these histories and anthologies often represent: Women's writing exists as a stagnant backwater, necessary to include, yet completely withdrawn from the more vital and dynamic currents of American literary and cultural life. Two tacit assumptions seem to be operative. First, that there are two separate literatures, one for women and one for men. Secondly, that women's literature is a static phenomenon which does not deal with the kinds of literary and ideological issues that make men's writing controversial. There are a number of other assumptions, as well, which indicate that women writers have been targets of what Elaine Showalter wittily calls "ad feminam criticism" and what Mary Ellmann, with greater indignation, designates as "phallic criticism."[2] The primary distinctions are sexual rather than literary. The fundamental assumption is that women are defined by their relationships with men. This assumption has a number of consequences for the perception of women's writing.

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their conception, Dickinson's artistic achievement is founded upon her much more fundamental failure as a woman.

Sometimes a consideration of the female author's relationships with literary men completely overshadows her contribution to American letters. Margaret Fuller, for example, wrote five full-length books and innumerable articles. Her *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* is the first major feminist document to appear in America. Fuller was also editor of the most important mid-nineteenth century literary periodical, the *Dial*. Yet, it is not her own work for which she is remembered. Fuller enters literary history primarily as the real-life figure Hawthorne satirized in *The Blithedale Romance*. In *The Literary History of the United States* she is remembered as Emerson's friend as well:

> Margaret Fuller and occasionally Hawthorne's sister-in-law Elizabeth Peabody shot bolts of aggressive femininity into the company with their radical notion that women are people, seeking friendship on a plane transcending sex.[7]

From the context, it would not appear than any irony is intended.

A more subtle form of devaluing the work of women writers in relation to their male counterparts is the frequent assertion that women write in imitation of some reputedly greater male author. Edith Wharton is regularly taxed with being the disciple of Henry James. Likewise, Leslie Fiedler in *Waiting for the End* which presents itself as a history of the American literary "scene" from Hemingway to Baldwin, dismisses Carson McCullers as one of the "Southern Lady Novelists" deriving from Faulkner.[8] His misogyny and contempt are clear. If women are defined as imitators, it becomes impossible to see their writing as innovative. The other charges which are regularly leveled at American women writers – triviality, nostalgia, limitation of range, etc. – follow from this central denial of their creativity. Underlying the assumption that women writers are essentially imitative is the fundamental preconception of the female mind as a passive receptacle. Innovation and exploration according to the same stereotypical precenception, are the province of the male mind. As Mary Ellmann points out, these preconceptions are based on an implicit, but incorrect, analogy with the physiological functions of male and female sexual organs.

In the foregoing I have attempted to uncover some of the more important implicit, and perhaps even unconscious, assumptions which lie behind the assessment of women's contribution to American letters. Explicit misogyny has for some time been passé. None-

theless, Leslie Fiedler confidently dismisses Carson McCullers as a "Lady Novelist" and pontifically pronounces Anne Bradstreet's poetry to be unreadable. Fiedler, in fact, demonstates many of the cruder forms of phallic criticism in *Waiting for the End.* One woman poet whose work he particularly admires possesses, Fiedler tells us, the female equivalent of "balls." Mary McCarthy is deemed "intolerably female in the worst sense." Whatever that may mean, it is unquestionably negative. At the same time, Fiedler questions the masculinity of male writers of whom he does not heartily approve. Richard Wilbur is not homosexual, Fiedler assures us, but his poetry smacks "of that intersex which aged men and women alike approach somewhat faster than they do death." Fiedler's distinctions are sexual, not literary. The assumption that informs those distinctions is that there is no greater praise for the woman writer than to attribute masculinity to her. Likewise, there is no more humiliating censure than to deny masculinity to a male writer. *Waiting for the End* appeared in 1964. Its title is more appropriate than Fiedler realized.

In the wake of the feminist movement there has been a marked increase of academic interest in women's writing. This interest has involved the recovery of a number of neglected works as well as the re-evaluation of women's contribution to American letters. The recovery of Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* is probably the most famous example of a neglected classic. Prior to the 1970's few serious literary people had heard of Charlotte Perkins Gilmore, much, less read her fiction. Nor did students of American literature know that in 1837 Harriet Martineau wrote *Society in America.* Yet all students knew about Dickens', de Creveceour's and de Toqueville's similar books.

Once a large body of women's writing was made available, the analysis of that material was begun. Whole periods of literary history have been reconstructed and individual literary reputations re-evaluated. American feminist scholarship, however, has not yet produced a literary history on the scale of Elaine Showalter's study of British women novelists, *A Literature of Their Own* (1977).

The reinstatement of American women writers has received valuable support from a rather unexpected source. Even the most cursory glance at Cleanth Brooks, R. W. B. Lewis and Robert Penn Warren's recent anthology, *American Literature: The Makers and the Making* (1973), reveals the change.[9] Their anthology includes selections from over three times the number of women writers represented in previous histories or anthologies emanating from the literary

establishment. That, in itself, is a promising start. (But, it must be mentioned that Brooks, *et al.* also include many more men than the usual anthology of American literature. Still, the net result is a gain for women.) One in six authors turns out to be female, while the tally is one in eleven for *The Growth of American Literature*, for example. According to Tillie Olsen, the average is one in twelve.[10] More important than the increase in numbers, however, is the treatment female writers receive.

Perhaps the most striking feature of *The Makers and the Making* is its unobtrusive acceptance of the validity of female experience. Introducing Anne Bradstreet's "Before the Birth of One of Her Children," the editors write: "The courage of this poem, the sense it gives of 'grace under pressure'...does not conceal Anne Bradstreet's very practical fear of dying during childbirth." By borrowing one of Hemingway's characteristic expressions, the authors imply that childbirth can test human courage as efficiently as warfare or bullfighting.

The acceptance of the legitimacy of female experience also allows for a re-evaluation of novelists like Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman and Edith Wharton. It has long been assumed that Jewett and Freeman were nostalgic local writers who recorded the decline of life, character and opportunity in post-Civil War New England. Their contribution to American literature was picturesque but trivial. Brooks, Lewis and Warren argue that Jewett and her fellow novelists transcend the merely regional through their concern with the larger theme of the condition of women in late nineteenth century America: "More often than not the condition as described is appalling, and the writers we are considering do not always try to disguise their sense of personal, female outrage." In their fiction, these women dramatically recorded the victimization of women in terms which compared the state of women with that of American blacks. Yet, not all of their female characters are victims. In the characteristic work of Jewett, as well as in the work of Wharton, Brooks finds "something stalwart, creative, enduring about the women that is notably lacking in the men." Facing greater challenges, these fictional women are frequently capable of more vigorous and more intelligent responses. Wharton is included in this group of authors due to her commitment to the theme of women.

Wharton is acquitted of the charge of imitating James in style as well as in subject matter. Brooks, *et al.* argue that James belongs to

the romance tradition of Hawthorne. Wharton, on the other hand, was a realist whose work is more in line with that of Howells, Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis. Although Wharton's America was very different from that of Howells or Lewis, she shared with them a commitment to the close inspection and meticulous description of social life and social change.

The editors of *The Makers and the Making* also liberate Gertrude Stein. Stein is usually remembered in literary histories for playing Big Mama to the lost generation and for being the victim of one of Hemingway's outbursts of rage. Occasionally her literary criticism is commented upon, since that fits nicely with the image of her as patroness to the expatriates. That she wrote a highly competent and highly experimental fiction is less frequently brought out. Brooks, Lewis and Warren not only reprint selections from *Three Lives*, *The Making of Americans* and from a volume of her poetry, *Tender Buttoms*, they also analyze her style in detail, demonstrating the absurdity of Hemingway's allegation that Stein learned all she knew about fiction from him.

As in earlier histories of American literature, women writers from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries are conspicuously absent. Emily Dickinson, however, is amply represented and ably discussed. Taking their point of departure in Allen Tate's essay from 1932, Brooks, *et. al.* emphasize not the biographical myth but Dickinson's education, her beliefs and especially the practice of her poetry. It is, in fact, on the basis of their poetic practice that Dickinson is elevated above Whitman and Bradstreet is elevated above Taylor. In Brooks' assessment, Dickinson's experimentation, her sharp intellectual wit and her capacity to pack several different kinds of meaning into her pithy poems not only mark her work as undeniably modern, but make it more innovative and more interesting than that of Whitman. Likewise, the editors praise Bradstreet's poetry for the depth of feeling with which she charged her domestic themes and for the originality she demonstrated in utilizing the Puritan plain style. By comparison Taylor's poetry is judged to be artificial, conventional and baroque.

The reinstatement of women writers implicit in *The Makers and the Making* is, as we have seen, based on the acceptance of the validity of female experience and on the evaluation of women writers as writers. It is on the basis of an analysis of Wharton's and Stein's prose style, for example, that they are freed from the onus of imitation. Likewise, it is Bradstreet's and Dickinson's poetic practice

which is assessed as superior to that of Taylor and Whitman. The re-evaluation of women's contribution to American letters is, however, a by-product of Brooks, Lewis and Warren's larger cultural and ideological program.

That program is, quite simply, the reinstatement of Southern cultural life as a distinct, but essential, aspect of American culture. Mark Twain once remarked that in the South the Civil War is what *Anno Domini* is elswhere, Southerners date from it. This is certainly true of *The Makers and the Making*. American history is divided into pre- and post-Civil War with a great deal of attention paid to the War and related issues, like slavery and the history of blacks. This central interest certainly explains the long introduction granted to Julia Ward Howe and the inclusion of her only literary achievement, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." At the same time, this focus on the Civil War allowed for the inclusion of a selection from Mary Boykin Chesnut's brilliant diary, a literary form rarely represented in anthologies of American literature. Authors like Ellen Glasgow, Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor are, of course, amply represented.

What is particularly refreshing about this historical presentation of American literature, aside from its greater justice to women writers, is that these three scholars take history as seriously as they do literature. The result is a richly complex and interesting past, after years of American studies reductionalism of American history to a single hypothesis about the nature of the American "experience." The complexity of their discussion of American history is the logical result of their assertion that the themes and forms of literature reflect the conflicts and tensions of history: A complex and sophisticated literature can only be explained in terms of an equally complex culture and society.

Although it would be wrong to underestimate the effectiveness with which feminist literary critics have undermined the tenets of phallic criticism and at the same time made good women's writing visible, the inclusion and reasonable discussion of so many American women writers in *The Makers and the Making* would seem to be primarily a result of the adoption of a pluralistic point of view. The authors' interest in reasserting Southern cultural life into the mainstream of American culture, combined with their view of the complexity of the relationship between history and literature, necessarily involves a rejection of the melting pot thesis so popular

with American Studies scholars. Instead, Brooks, Lewis and Warren argue for the recognition of American cultural pluralism. The chief beneficiaries of their reintroduction of the idea of cultural pluralism to the study of American literature, aside from Southern writers generally, are women and black writers.

A number of relatively recent literary events have contributed to the acceptance of the idea of America as a pluralistic culture – the second renaissance of black writing, the achievement of American Jewish writers, the emergence of native American writing, and currently the the insistence that women do have, and have had, a distinguished literature of their own. If justice has not yet come to American women writers, an anthology as prestigious as Cleanth Brooks, R. W. B. Lewis and Robert Penn Warren's *American Literature: The Makers and the Making* indicates that we can be optimistic about the future.

NOTES

1 "Introduction: The Achievement of Edith Wharton," in *Edith Wharton: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Twentieth Century Views, ed. Irving Howe (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 1.
2 Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 74; Mary Ellmann, *Thinking About Women* (1968; rpt. London: Virago, 1979), pp. 27–55.
3 *American Poetry and Prose*, Fourth Edition Complete (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 1520.
4 "Emily Dickinson: A Poet Restored," in *Emily Dickinson: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Twentieth Century Views, ed. Richard B. Sewall (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1963), p. 97.
5 *After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickinson* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 495.
6 *The Growth of American Literature* (New York: American Book Company, 1956), II, 131.
7 Robert E. Spiller, Willard Thorp, Thomas H. Johnson, and Henry Seidel Canby, *Literary History of the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), I, 375.
8 *Waiting for the End: The American Literary Scene from Hemingway to Baldwin* (1964; rpt. Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1967), p. 19.
9 *American Literature: The Makers and the Making*, 2 vol. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973).
10 *Silences* (New York: Delacorte, 1978), p. 24.