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# Twenty Years On: A Literature of Their Own Revisited

ELAINE SHOWALTER

In 1965, when I began to do research for my Ph.D. dissertation on Victorian women writers, feminist criticism did not exist. Virginia Woolf's letters and diaries were scattered and unpublished. Scholars still called Elizabeth Gaskell "Mrs." and Frances Burney "Fanny." No one edited women's studies journals, or compiled bibliographies of women's writing. At the University of California at Davis, where I was studying, "Theory" was not even a shadow on the sunny horizon, and the New Criticism, F.R. Leavis, Northrop Frye, and seven kinds of ambiguity marked the boundaries of my critical sophistication. I had chosen my thesis topic in part out of lingering anger at my undergraduate college, Bryn Mawr, where English majors were required to read every tenth-rate male Romantic poet and Elizabethan dramatist, but virtually no women, and in part out of my own devotion to the Victorian women writers.

Professional opportunities for academic women seemed so limited in the mid-1960s that I felt paradoxically freed to write about the books I liked, rather than the ones most likely to get me a job. Gwendolyn Needham, my thesis adviser at the University of California at Davis, was sympathetic to my ideas and demanding about my scholarship, but my dissertation, "The Double Standard: Criticism of Women Writers in Victorian Periodicals 1845-1880," was a hybrid, an attempt to write about women in an outmoded and inadequate critical vocabulary. Princeton University, where I actually wrote most of the dissertation as a faculty wife from 1966 on, did not hire women, but it had the fabulous Parrish collection of Victorian fiction, and all the Victorian journals were still on the open shelves, although only the first volume of the *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals* was available to help me identify anonymous reviewers.

By 1970, when I got my Ph.D. and had my second child during the same month, the mood of the country had changed, and I had become an active member of the women's liberation movement. I had spent the summer of 1968 in Paris with my husband and daughter, living in a communal household of French, English, and American students and professors in the aftermath of the politically transformative *événements* of May, and I had been involved with the anti-war protests at the MLA that December. In Princeton, a branch of N.O.W. opened in 1969, and I joined immediately. There were only seventeen of us at the beginning, but we were full of energy and organized a daycare center (still running), consciousness-raising groups, a newsletter which I edited, a booklet on sex-stereotyping in children's books, a state conference on women's rights, and trips to meetings with groups in New York and Philadelphia. By 1970, I was president of the group, had started writing for *Radical Feminism*, had joined the advisory board of the Feminist Press, and was editing an anthology called *Women's Liberation and Literature*. At Douglass College, the women's college of Rutgers

University, I had been promoted from part-time lecturer to assistant professor, and had started to teach courses on women writers.

As the issues in my work and my life took on new meaning in the light of feminism, I began to envisage a much bolder critical undertaking than my thesis and to imagine a literary criticism that would do for the history of women's writing what Northrop Frye had done for Canadian literature, or even what Perry Miller and F.O. Matthiessen had done for American literature. Working with the Feminist Press was an inspiration; Florence Howe, the late Carol Ohmann, the late Elaine Hedges, and Mary-Anne Ferguson were senior scholars who became mentors and models. At Princeton, Ann Douglas had become the first woman in the English Department; we spent long hours talking about our work and arranged a deal: she could have American women writers, I would have the British. There seemed to be no scholarly competition for the turf.

But how should feminist literary criticism and feminist literary history be carried out? Building on Ann's ideal of heroic scholarship in the Perry Miller tradition and on my own critical heroes, Kathleen Tillotson and Northrop Frye, I set myself the task of filling in the gaps between Austen and Lessing by reading as many novels by English women as I could find and trying to understand the ways they related to each other. If there was a female literary tradition, I was sure it came from imitation, literary convention, the market-place, and critical reception, not from biology or psychology.

My theoretical assumptions came from the sociology and ethnography of literature. Looking at such literary subcultures as African-American writing, Canadian writing, and Anglo-Indian writing, I attempted to define women's writing as the product of a subculture, evolving with relation to a dominant mainstream. In its evolution, I argued, women's writing moves "in the direction of an all-inclusive female realism, a broad, socially informed exploration of the daily lives and values of women within the family and the community" (*A Literature* 29). But a mature women's literature ceases to be part of a subculture and can move into "a seamless participation in the literary mainstream" (*A Literature* 36).

As good as the Parrish Collection's books and manuscripts were, I was still missing many minor writers, and I knew I needed to go to England. With the support of Richard Poirier and Frederick Main at Rutgers, I got an English Department fellowship and spent a year in London trying to track down books. The London Library and the British Museum had endless treasures, and the very first week I arrived, I had the good omen of meeting Margaret Drabble in the Round Reading Room. Travelling around chilly municipal libraries in England in quest of women writers' archives, I was often rewarded by becoming the first scholar to read a harrowing journal or open a box of letters. In the cold, dark winter of 1973, the notorious British year of strikes, labor struggles, and systematic power blackouts, I even read sometimes by candlelight. Victorian women writers, whom I thought of by their initials, CB, GE, EG, EBB, became my closest companions. Following Ann Douglas's example, I started to buy Victorian women's novels second-hand from street-markets and shops and to build my own collection. And in the W.S.P.U. archives then housed at Kensington Palace

and the women's movement collection at the Fawcett Library, I found "free zones in the library world, new found lands for scholars to explore" ("Notes" 225).

My reading raised some questions I didn't know how to answer about the autonomy of a women's literary tradition, but I felt sure that there would be an audience for my book; and the writers themselves kept me going as I read about their hopes that all their struggles and failures would make a difference to the women who came after. They gave me the confidence to believe that even if I were not Northrop Frye's sister—the great feminist critic who would get everything right—it was enough to find the courage to write exactly what I thought and to be willing to share my own struggles and errors in the faith that the critics who came after me would know more and do better.

When I returned from London, I sent the manuscript to Princeton University Press, and they accepted it with some substantial cuts—half of the chapter on Virginia Woolf, with a long reading of *The Voyage Out*, bit the dust—and their "Titles Committee" changed my working title from "The Female Tradition in the English Novel" to *A Literature of Their Own*, a phrase they took from a statement by John Stuart Mill, whom I quote on the first page in the third sentence of the book: "If women lived in a different country from men, and had never read any of their writings, they would have a literature of their own" (3).

I liked the new title because this sentence from Mill's *The Subjection of Women* was my departure-point; it raised the issues of nationality, subculture, literary influence, and literary autonomy I had attempted to theorize; and, in the word "their," rather than "our," it emphasized my own cultural distance, as an American, from the English women I discussed. The phrase "of their own," or "of our own," in the titles of feminist scholarly and popular books has certainly had quite a vogue in the past twenty years; but almost all reviewers of the book ignored my reference to Mill. They interpreted the title as a reference to Virginia Woolf, whom, some thought, I had treated with insufficient reverence. Toril Moi perceived hidden motives of appropriation and rejection: "A distinguished feminist critic like Elaine Showalter, for example, signals her subtle swerve away from Virginia Woolf by taking over, yet changing, Woolf's title. Under Showalter's pen, *A Room of One's Own* becomes *A Literature of Their Own*, as if she wished to indicate her problematic distance from the tradition of women writers she lovingly uncovers in her book" (1). Janet Todd noted that "In *A Literature of Their Own*, already a snub, many thought, to the original Woolfian text, *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf was trounced for evading the problem of femaleness in her projection of the disturbing and dark aspects of a woman's psyche onto men" (36). Only the Australian critic K. K. Ruthven emphasized Mill, to take exception to the "separatism" of writing a book about women writers alone, for, he argued, "men and women inhabit the same countries and read each other's work habitually" (124).

Having a male critic like Ruthven comment on the book was progress. Certainly women writers and critics must and do habitually read the work of men; but until very recently, the reverse has not been the case. The critical reception of *A Literature of Their Own* by men has been generally respectful, but among women critics the book has been both imitated and reviled. On one hand, it

helped create the new field of feminist literary history and gynocriticism, has been translated into several languages, and has influenced similar undertakings around the world. I've even been cited in an article on the evolution of women's rock music (Wurtzel 63-70). Published in England by Virago Press, the book became accessible to British students and scholars, and was even reviewed by some of the women novelists I had analyzed. Carmen Calill at Virago used my bibliography as a guide to reprinting texts in the Virago Modern Classic paperback series, and other scholars followed up on the search for manuscripts and letters. The response has more than fulfilled my hopes and dreams.

But what I did not anticipate was that in feminist literary history and criticism, as in every other field, being first has its disadvantages, because you become the launching-pad for subsequent work and the starting-point for everyone else's improvements and corrections. For the past twenty years, I have been attacked from virtually every point on the feminist hermeneutic circle, as separatist, careerist, theoretical, anti-theoretical, racist, homophobic, politically correct, traditional, and non-canonical critic. I've come to expect new critical studies of women's writing to point out how I have "failed," and in 1997, at the book exhibit at the MLA convention in Toronto, I picked up galleys of a new book which added that I had "notoriously failed."

Still, being notorious for failing is better than not being noticed at all; and I decided early on that I would not defend *A Literature of Their Own* against attack, but rather that I would try to let go of the book and allow intellectual debate in feminist criticism to follow its natural course. I've continued to work on women writers and on the theory of feminist criticism and to move on to other subjects as well. I have followed the cycles of criticism and attack with attention and interest, and I have even had the good fortune to live long enough to receive a few apologies, in person or in print. Most important, I've had the advantages of two decades of a fruitful and dazzling critical revolution in women's literary history and feminist criticism to broaden my understanding, deepen my knowledge, and sharpen my thinking. *A Literature of Their Own* appeared during the first wave of feminist literary criticism which focused on re-discovery. In the early 1970s, I found it important to write about continuities between generations of women writers, and I deliberately foregrounded women critics as well. But the emphasis on female literary lineage is partly rhetorical, for women's writing is always at least bi-textual; as I wrote in "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness," it is a double-voiced discourse influenced by both the dominant masculine literary tradition and the muted feminine one.

By the end of the 1970s, in their magisterial study of women writers, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar set out a compelling theory of female literary history as a dialogue between women writers and a patriarchal tradition. Their own theory was a revision of Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence," presenting the battle between the sexes as a linguistic and literary struggle that generated new genres and forms. Moreover, Gilbert and Gubar mapped out an anxiety-ridden terrain for nineteenth-century women writers that seemed unconsciously to describe the psychodynamics of the contemporary feminist critic: feelings of alienation from male precursors, an urgent

need for a female audience, dread of patriarchal authority, and internalized conflict about theoretical invention and imaginative autonomy. In their critical trilogy *No Man's Land*, Gilbert and Gubar moved into the twentieth century to describe the ways that women artists were not only enabled but also daunted by the example of great female precursors, and responded with "mingled feelings of rivalry and anxiety" (199).

In the 1990s, criticism of women's writing has to take the fullest possible account of the whole network of literary forces in which each text is enmeshed, and my hypothetical model of a chain of female literary influence needs to be understood as a historically-specific strategy rather than a dogmatic absolute. The eve of a new century seems like the ideal time for stock-taking, and the prospect of a new edition of *A Literature of Their Own* gives me the opportunity to reflect on what has taken place, and how I would want to change the book if I were writing it now.

### Theories

In the 1980s, as European theoretical models came to dominate literary criticism, feminist critics of *A Literature of Their Own* pointed to my theoretical "naiveté" and my stubborn American pragmatism. Some critics identified theoretical contexts in my writing of which I myself had certainly been unaware. Patricia Waugh noted that "theories of ego psychologists and the cognitive-developmental models of Erikson, Piaget, and Kohlberg hover behind the pages ... of feminist literary histories like Elaine Showalter's" (40). Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn argued that "[i]mplicit in Showalter's argument—as in much Anglo-American feminist criticism—is the assumption that the text, and language itself, are transparent media which reflect a pre-existent objective reality, rather than signifying systems which inscribe ideology and are actually constitutive of reality" (25).

The most substantial attack came from Toril Moi in *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985). Even before her book came out, I had heard rumors that it would be very critical of my work, and I had received a letter from Toril Moi assuring me that her stringent critique came from deep sisterly respect. (This is the standard feminist academic formula for "Brace yourself.") Indeed, from the first page of the book, *Sexual/Textual Politics* used my work, along with that of Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, and others, to exemplify the inadequacies of "Anglo-American" feminist criticism.

Moi's central argument is that my "theoretical framework is never made explicit." In her view, my implicit theory was that "a text should reflect the writer's experience, and that the more authentic the experience is felt to be by the reader, the more valuable the text." "Implicitly," she maintains, my position "strongly favours the form of writing commonly known as critical or bourgeois realism" (4). Indeed, Moi declares, "there is detectable within her literary criticism a strong, unquestioned belief in the values, not of proletarian humanism, but of traditional bourgeois humanism of a liberal-individualist kind" (6). In my "crypto-Lukácsian" realism, my "demand for a unitary vision," and my depen-

dence on "traditional aesthetic categories" (8, 17), I am unable to appreciate the decentered writing of modernism and its feminist uses.

Moi returns to discuss *A Literature of Their Own* in two pages in her fourth chapter, "Women writing and writing about women," where she reiterates her view that its flaws lie in "its unstated theoretical assumptions about the relationship between literature and reality and between feminist politics and literary evaluation" (56). In contrast, she maintains, the poststructuralist theory of French feminism in general, and Julia Kristeva in particular, is the most sophisticated and far-reaching form of feminist literary analysis. Rejecting biologism and essentialism, it deconstructs the "the opposition between masculinity and femininity" (12).

Moi's analysis of feminist criticism has been very influential, and in the U.K., where *Sexual/Textual Politics* is a standard university text, many students take their views of *A Literature of Their Own* directly from it, without reading my work at all. Indisputably, I had not read or even heard of Cixous, Irigaray, or Kristeva, who were barely known in the U.S. when I finished the book in 1974. *New French Feminisms*, edited by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, which introduced American scholars to French feminist writing, did not come out until 1980. But as a literary historian, I would still have found little that was useful in their work. More significantly, in her own immersion in French and Marxist criticism, Moi missed the real theoretical assumptions of *A Literature of Their Own*, assumptions derived from a very different approach to literature, reality, gender, and canon. In Moi's view, the most important theoretical questions were philosophical: "What is interpretation? What does it mean to read? What is a text?" (77). My theoretical questions, however, were historical and cultural. What is the relationship between a dominant and a muted culture? Does a muted culture have a history and a literature of its own, or must it always be measured according to the chronology, standards, and values of the dominant? Can a minority criticism develop its own methods and theories through wide and careful reading of its own literary texts? How does a literary subculture evolve and change? The disciplines with answers for such questions were not philosophy and linguistics, but cultural anthropology and social history.

If I were writing *A Literature of Their Own* today, I would certainly have a broader comparative base in literary subcultures and in the theories that have emerged around postcolonial studies. I would also make a stronger theoretical case for "realism" as a literary convention. As George Levine has demonstrated in *The Realistic Imagination*, Victorian narrative realism is far from being a simplistic mimetic rendering of "experience," male or female. It is a highly developed technique of representation, with its own theoretical underpinnings (131-228). In addition, there is nothing inherently radical or subversive about anti-realist literary conventions. Today's avant-garde is tomorrow's advertising. Despite its intellectual vogue, French feminist theory has still not come to terms with women's writing and literary history, and many of its leading figures have moved on to other subjects.

Meanwhile, gynocriticism, as I named the study of women's writing in 1979, has developed to offer a coherent narrative of women's literary history. In rela-

tion to the literary mainstream, women's writing has moved through phases of subordination, protest, and autonomy, phases connected by recurring images, metaphors, themes, and plots that emerge from women's social and literary experience and from reading both male and female precursors. As Susan Wolfson notes in her excellent overview of feminist criticism and British literature, "[b]y the early 1980s it was clear that feminist literary criticism and attention to female writers had gained institutional legitimacy. These achievements consolidated over the decade, their success evident in the curricula of English courses from junior high school through graduate school.... And the classroom anthologies ... have evolved accordingly" (12-3). Wolfson concludes that "the 1990s are shaping up as a decade in which women's writing is becoming increasingly available by force of new anthologies and reprints of long-out-of-print writing by women, and by the emergence of on-line texts and editions of women's writing, accessible on the internet through (among other websites) the University of Virginia's Electronic Text Center, the Brown University Women Writers Project, and the University of Pennsylvania Department of English home page" (18).

### Literary History and the Canon

I had imagined *A Literature of Their Own* as a book that would challenge the traditional canon, going far beyond the handful of acceptable women writers to look at all the minor and forgotten figures whose careers and books had shaped a tradition. "It is only by considering them all—Millicent Grogan as well as Virginia Woolf," I wrote, "that we can begin to record new choices in a new literary history" (36). I wanted to demystify the process by which some women writers had been granted "greatness" and reveal the material contexts and circumstances in which women's writing was imagined, published, disseminated, and reviewed. Nevertheless, some critics have objected to my choices and omissions, and some to the idea that literary history can be written at all.

Several scholars have argued that the female literary tradition in the novel begins much earlier than 1840s and that I neglect novelists of the eighteenth century. Marilyn Butler objects that "Showalter concludes that a continuous women's tradition can be spoken of only for writers born after 1800. She believes that women writers before that date could not consider themselves professionals and therefore (though the connection between these two propositions is not clear) could not relate to other women writers. Here it is hard to know quite what thinking has gone into Showalter's use of the term professional.... There was always a woman writer's network, though not all women writers belonged to it, and Austen herself, significantly, did not" (xxviii). Margaret J. Ezell blames my "evolutionary" model, which "leads in part to the relegating of earlier women to the earliest phase of the female tradition, not very high up on the evolutionary ladder" (145). Janet Todd, in *Feminist Literary History*, protests that "Showalter can declare that women did not think of themselves as professional writers before 1800, when there are in fact hosts of professional novelists in the eighteenth century.... In this concentration on the Victorian period and on the mode of domestic realism, as well as in its ignoring of the problem of aesthetic judgment and



language, *A Literature of Their Own* was typical of the early phase of feminist criticism on women.... its omissions skewed the understanding of the female past and encouraged premature generalization that did duty for specific history" (27).

Actually my initial research for the book had been on eighteenth century and earlier writers; and I have learned an enormous amount since from Butler, Ezell, Todd, Ruth Perry, Moira Ferguson, Claudia Johnson, Nancy Armstrong, Jane Spencer, Margaret Doody, Carol Barish, Susan Wolfson, Esther Schor, and my husband English Showalter, who has been editing the seventy volumes of manuscript letters of the eighteenth-century French woman novelist Madame de Graffigny almost as long as we have been married.

But I continue to think that before the nineteenth century, as Ruth Perry points out in her splendid biography of Mary Astell, no British "woman planned a career as a writer; there was no such concept as a *woman* of letters" (5). Moreover, the appearance of the male pseudonym among British and European women writers, from "Ernst Ahlgren" (Victorian Benedictson) in Sweden, to George Sand in France and "Fernando Caballero" (Cecelia Bohl) in Spain, was a clear historical marker of a new literary consciousness based on gender. I chose to begin in the 1840s in order to emphasize professionalism, marketing, and group awareness, rather than to ignore or disdain eighteenth-century women novelists. Kathleen Tillotson's great study, *Novels of the 1840s* (1956), which clearly delineated the major changes in the form and marketing of novels during the decade, influenced my choice as well.

Geoffrey Hartman, in his influential book *Criticism in the Wilderness* (1980), argues that every new literary theory is based on or generalizes from a particular text-milieu. In its first phase, feminist criticism developed out of a dialogue with the Victorian patriarchs (Mill, Carlyle, Arnold, Marx, Freud) and with a textual preference for Victorian women's novels. Moreover, Victorian studies was a field hospitable to a feminist presence early on, in its interdisciplinarity, its acceptance of women writers, and its friendliness towards women scholars and critics. Many young women graduate students in my generation were drawn to the Victorian period, because it was the only literary period in which women were accepted as canonical writers. Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970) began as a dissertation in Victorian literature at Columbia; at the interdisciplinary journal *Victorian Studies*, a feminist editor, Martha Vicinus, commissioned a special issue on women and edited a two-volume set of bibliographic essays, *Suffer and Be Still* and *A Widening Sphere*. Only later did the field of eighteenth-century studies become receptive to feminist analysis.

By the late 1970s, feminist criticism was debating differences of class and race, and my references to the development of a black literary subculture as "a precedent for feminist scholarship to use" (*Literary* 445) offended Barbara Smith, who commented in her essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" that "the idea of critics like Showalter *using* Black literature is chilling, a case of barely disguised cultural imperialism" (29). I reprinted the essay without comment when I edited *The New Feminist Criticism*, but I was chilled myself by Smith's response to my interdisciplinary efforts and her rage ("the final insult") at my citation in the book of a literary history of the African-American novel written by a white male

scholar. As late as 1997, a critic indifferent to the fact that my book is about the English tradition commented that the “absence of American black women” in *A Literature of Their Own* had been “much criticized” and that my “inability” to deal with them made my arguments “fundamentally flawed” (Mills 115). Nonetheless, I have yet to hear from anyone exactly which nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century black English women novelists I should have included.

Finally, for some critics in the 1970s and 1980s, I was still much too canonical, too unwilling to abandon altogether the idea of any coherent history or tradition or canon. According to K.K. Ruthven, the whole notion of “literary history” and a “literary tradition” was dead: “It first demarcates an arbitrary category called ‘the literary’ from other cultural phenomena for which a marxist would expect to find common materialist explanations; and it then assumes that instances of it constitute a continuum on which literary historians are free to project those tripartite structures of development they are so fond of” (126). My tripartite structure—feminine, feminist, female—is the one he mainly has in mind.

Toril Moi went further, arguing that work like mine aimed “to create a separate canon of women’s writing, not to abolish all canons” (78). Yet, as Moi herself declared when she was attacking another Anglo-American feminist critic in a different context, claiming to “abolish” literary canons is a gesture of hollow rhetorical grandiosity: “To be ‘against’ power is not to abolish it in a fine, post-1968 libertarian gesture, but to hand it over to somebody else” (148). The construction of a literary canon is not a conspiracy, but a process determined by a large cultural network. Work by such critics as Richard Brodhead and John Guillory has shown that canon-formation, involving the reclamation of devalued writers, is an important part of critical revolutions, and that new canons “will not surface except through the force of someone’s or some group’s interests. And whether they will stay above water on future maps of the literary continents is a question exactly *not* of their innate value (which never saved a past yet) but of whether those interests can successfully institutionalize themselves, can build new institutions and win old ones to the cause of making theirs be the past worth remembering” (Brodhead 7).

In contrast to the claims of some careless readers, I was not advocating a simple Whig literary history. But I still remain committed to the idea, even the metaphor, of progress in English women’s writing, if only in terms of range and freedom of expression. Moreover, I think it is necessary to evaluate the relative success and failure of women’s writing, and I cannot agree with critics like Ann Ardis, who insists that feminist critics should reject all models of “literary hierarchies” as patriarchal, in the interests of a “noncanonical theory of value” (176). “When asked if I have found any great works in all my reading, “Ardis concludes in her study of New Woman’s writing, “I usually respond by ... turning the question back on my interlocutor: does your interest in aesthetic value disguise anxiety about the feminist politics of these novels? What cultural values are you defending through an emphasis on the formal rather than the ideological pleasures of these texts?” (175).

Although the intent of these rhetorical questions is clearly both to avoid answering the issue of value and to induce guilt and shame in the hapless interlocutor, I confess to a shameless persistence in my heresy. After twenty-five years of feminist criticism, I do not think that feminists have exorcised all sense of literary hierarchies, however forcefully we may argue in public against them. And as I consider the development of English women's fiction from the early 1970s to the present, I continue to believe that women's writing needs no apologies or special treatment and that it can sustain the most rigorous tests of aesthetic judgment and literary quality.

### New Women and Their Fiction

In 1990, as the approaching millennium kindled a new interest in women's fiction of the 1890s, *A Literature of Their Own* came under attack from a new generation of feminist literary critics. Some complained that I was too dismissive of the artistic importance of women novelists of the 1890s, or that I had underestimated the value of the women's suffrage novel. "Elaine Showalter, in *A Literature of Their Own*," wrote Shirley Peterson in 1993, "continues to validate canonical aesthetic standards at the expense of women's political writing. She hails the British women's suffrage movement as a historical and literary period that galvanized women writers in a uniquely political fashion. She praises them for their courageous rejection of Victorian reserve, yet she goes on to devalue the literary importance of their works" (Peterson 102).

I would now be able to give much more emphasis to the 1890s as a transitional period for women's writing, thanks in large part to books like Jane Eldridge Miller's *Rebel Women: Feminism, Modernism, and The Edwardian Novel* (1994), Ann Ardis's *New Women, New Novels* (1990), Rita Felski's *The Gender of Modernity* (1995), and the work of Margaret D. Stetz, who edited the journal *Turn-of-the-Century Women*. There are now editions of the work of Amy Levy, Sarah Grand, George Egerton, and other important women writers of the 1890s. But when I was writing *A Literature of Their Own*, most of these women were completely unknown. In 1971, I went to Bath in search of Sarah Grand and opened the cartons in the Municipal Library which had sat untouched since her death. After the book was published, Gillian Kersley, an independent scholar living in Bath, decided to write a full-length biography of Grand. The papers and novels of the suffragettes were kept at Kensington Palace, and scholars had not yet analyzed the art of the suffrage movement.

Yet artistically and politically, the 1890s were a major period for women writers. In contrast to the gloom of Hardy and Gissing, Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, the British suffragist who was part of this generation, recalled the joy felt by young women: "It was a wonderful thing at that period to be young among young comrades, for the ninth decade of the last century was a time of expansion and vision.... We read, discussed, debated, and experimented, and felt that all life lay before us to be changed and moulded by our vision and desire" (88). In the field of fiction, the 1890s seemed to offer great opportunities to the young, with the demise of the three-volume novel and lending-library system, and the

rise of the literary journal and the short story. With the collapse of the three-decker came the collapse of what Holbrook Jackson called "a type of novel: the old sentimental lending-library novel of polite romantic atmosphere and crudely happy endings ... [the novel which] was calculated to produce that drowsy state of mild peacefulness which many people believe to be the end and aim of all good literature" (218).

In place of the dowdy three-decker came the slim single volume, exquisitely bound in shades of lemon or mauve and hinting of the forbidden and perverse. *The Yellow Book*, founded in April 1894, epitomized the shift from domesticity to art and "represented wide-scale collaboration and cooperation across the boundaries of class, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, discipline and ideology" (Stetz and Lasner 12). It published work by many women poets, artists, and writers, two of whom also served as sub-editors. Indeed, the term "New Woman" made its debut in May 1894, in an exchange between Sarah Grand and Ouida in the *North American Review*.

1894 was an *annus mirabilis* for New Woman writing as well (Miller 32). Among the novels published during the year were Rhoda Broughton's *A Beginner*, Emma Frances Brooke's *A Superfluous Woman*, Sara Jeanette Duncan's *A Daughter of Today*, Rita's *A Husband of No Importance*, Sarah Grand's *Our Manifold Nature*, Edith Johnstone's *A Sunless Heart*, Mona Caird's *The Daughters of Danaus*, May Crommelin's *Dust Before the Wind*, Annie Holdsworth's *Joanna Trail, Spinster*, "Iota"'s *A Yellow Aster*, Ella Hepworth Dixon's *The Story of a Modern Woman*, Dorothy Leighton's *Disillusion*, Florence Farr's *The Dancing Faun*, John Strange Winter's (Henrietta Stannard) *A Blameless Woman*, George Paston's (Emily Symonds) *A Modern Amazon*, George Egerton's *Discords*, and Elizabeth Robins's cruel satire on these pseudonymous female personae, *George Mandeville's Husband*.

Yet the heyday of the New Woman Novelist was pitifully brief. By 1895, the blaze of women's writing was reduced to sparks and ashes, and the death of the New Woman novel was widely proclaimed. Moreover, the writers themselves did not fare well. Many published little or nothing after their debuts; virtually all have disappeared from standard literary history.

In *A Literature of Their Own*, I placed most of the blame for the New Woman writers' demise on the women themselves. "In retrospect," I wrote then, "it looks as if all the feminists had but one story to tell, and exhausted themselves in its narration ... Beginning with a sense of unity and ... an interest in the 'precious speciality' of the female novelist, they ended ... with the dream that by withdrawing from the world they would find a higher female truth" (215). I have since tried to soften this harsh judgment, in introductions to Sarah Grand's *The Beth Book* (1981), Mary Cholmondely's *Red Pottage* (1985), and Olive Schreiner's *Story of an African Farm* (1993), in *Sexual Anarchy* (1990), and especially in an anthology of women's short stories from the 1890s, *Daughters of Decadence* (1995). Women's novels in the 1890s often choose the woman artist, writer, or intellectual as heroine, and explore the limits of feminist aspiration for their generation; the tragic feminist intellectual is a Nineties heroine as significant as the tragic mulatto in African-American fiction. If New Women novelists withdrew in frus-

tration from social engagement, they had good reason to do so and fought courageously against the conventions of the time.

Nevertheless, fascinating as I find the psychological twists and turns of New Woman fiction, none of these British novels are as aesthetically satisfying as Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) or Rachilde's *The Juggler* (1900). The novel was a problematic genre for *fin-de-siècle* English women writers, as many of them realized. In their hands it tended to be didactic, talky, episodic, and contrived. Following on the great achievements and reputation of George Eliot, they suffered from the anxiety of influence; and they had outgrown the plots of Victorian fiction without having entirely reinvented their own. John Kucich argues that New Woman novelists had difficulties "accommodating the ambiguities of truth-telling within fiction itself to the demands of feminism, especially at a time when early modernist aesthetics was moving ... away from the ideals of truth-telling cherished by Victorian realism. It is because women writers could not negotiate the truth dilemmas of post-Victorian literature, not because of their lack of talent or their ideological single-mindedness, that they made inevitable their own exile from a canonical tradition that had begun to treat honesty as an issue that could only be resolved through aesthetic rarefaction" (279).

The best British women's writing of the 1890s is in the short story rather than in the novel. Women writers found an appropriate form in the short story for the strong feminist themes of the decade: the rebellion of the muse, the exploration of a new woman's language, and the protest against the appropriation, even theft, of women's stories by men. New Women had to rewrite aestheticism and decadence in order to include female creativity. They had to present female sexuality and reproduction as positive creative forces, rather than as biological traps or the binary opposite of artistic creation. They had also to deal with the relationship between aestheticism and commodification.

Their short stories, more than their novels, describe the struggle for new words and new forms. In Sarah Grand's "The Undefinable: A Fantasia," for example, a painter whose work has become sterile and conventional is agonizing over the loss of his powers. "[T]here gradually took possession of me a great amazement, not to say alarm, as I forced myself to acknowledge that there must be some blunting of my faculties ... What could be the matter with me? Loss of nerve-power?" (265). He is interrupted in these thoughts by an unexpected visit in his studio from a confident young woman offering herself as a model. At first he does not find her attractive; she has "eyes out of which an imperious spirit shone independently, not looking up, but meeting mine on the same level" (267). Nonetheless, he paints her, and to his astonishment, the work is brilliant. He suddenly realizes who she is: "a free woman, a new creature, a source of inspiration the like of which no man hitherto has even imagined in art or literature" (287). But before he can finish the painting she vanishes, and although he drives in his carriage through the streets, hoping to find her, he never sees her again. Until he himself changes and grows, the story concludes, she will never return.

### The 21st Century

The themes and forms of contemporary women's writing have certainly changed since the 1970s, and there is now even a major literary award, the Orange Prize, for women novelists in English. Of the writers who have emerged since the first edition of *A Literature of Their Own*, at least one—Angela Carter—must be included in any female literary canon or tradition, and several deserve serious critical attention. But I would stand by the concerns I expressed in 1977, with one important modification. Then I warned that if “the room of one's own becomes the destination, a feminine secession from ‘male’ power, logic, and violence, it is a tomb.” Disturbingly, even in 1998, the room of one's own, as the locus for chronic fatigue syndrome, female fantasy, or paralyzing anxiety, is still an isolated space in women's fiction. But there is also hopeful evidence that “contact with a female tradition and a female culture” has been a center, inspiring women writers to “take strength in their independence to act in the world” (319).

What seems different now is that the goal Virginia Woolf articulated at the end of *A Room of One's Own*, seventy years ago, to labor in poverty and obscurity for the coming of Shakespeare's sister, no longer seems meaningful or necessary. Feminist criticism and women's literary history do not depend on the discovery of a great unique genius, but on the establishment of the continuity and legitimacy of women's writing as a form of art. With the globalization of culture, moreover, the national boundaries of the novel are fading and disappearing. Was Sylvia Plath a British or an American writer? Can the influence of Toni Morrison fail to affect the novel in Europe? The distinctions of nationality and culture I meant to imply in the title of *A Literature of Their Own* are no longer as sharp as they were only twenty-five years ago. But if the distinctions of gender may also soon become matters of literary history, it will be because feminist criticism has succeeded in its task and having played a part in that great collective effort has been a source of pride and delight to me that no theoretical debates can ever blur.

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