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**The "Woman Writer"
and feminist literary history;
or, how the success of feminist literary history
has compromised the conceptual coherence of its
lead character, the "woman writer"**

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There is a specific logic that has worked sequentially to produce the necessity behind a literary history of women's writing: first there is the critique of the canon as too much "his," of having systematically excluded "her." Then, by using the wrongs and occlusions of this sexist literary history, an alternative feminist literary history tells "her" story. This project justifies the gathering together of women writers into a separate study, which is studied as a group, so as to isolate its distinct character, sometimes in contrast to its "other"—men's writing. Then, (and this is the third stage of the discursive isolation of the woman writer), the separation of women's from men's writings, first justified on political and ethical grounds, is assumed to be grounded in history. It is now assumed that the separation of women writers from men writers is inevitable, natural, proper, and illuminating. Such an assumption, with the organization of literary and cultural histories it enables, and the category of "woman writer" it naturalizes, have yielded rich critical insights. But this presumptive separation of writers by gender has also become a kind of filter, encouraging a critical blindness to the contexts, motives, and affiliations of writers who were women.

Here it is useful to distinguish between the liberal or strict elaboration of women's writing, for each encounters a distinct problem. If there is a generous, inclusive catholic

impulse to find the minimal common traits of all writers who were women, there is a tendency to suppress the very considerable differences among women writers. Alternatively, if one develops a more rigorous, strict, and exclusive concept of women's writing, women who wrote are put "on trial": they are tested for their correspondence to a feminist checklist of desirable traits. In her pioneering essay on Behn's *Love Letters*, Judith Kegan Gardiner documents the way the incessant sex, the occasional sexism, and the consistent Toryism of Behn's writing have troubled feminist readers ("Aphra Behn's *Love Letters*, The Canon, and Women's Tastes," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 8, no. 2 [Fall 1989]: 201-222). This procedure usually works to the benefit of some women writers—for example, those women writers whose opinions were proto-feminist, those who never married, or those who enjoyed relative autonomy from men. By this analysis, some women writers turn out to be more "women" than others. As a corrective to these tendencies, there has been a strong challenge to this false harmonization of women's writing. Thus for example, Beth Kowalski-Wallace's book, *Their Father's Daughters: Hannah More, Maria Edgeworth & Patriarchal Complicity* (New York: Oxford UP, 1991) reads the "good daughters"—those who not only did not advocate separation from the patriarchs, but proclaimed their indebtedness and linkage to the fathers. Paula McDowell's book, *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace 1678-1730*, contests the notion that women were excluded from the eighteenth-century public sphere or accepted their subordination to men, by documenting the many registers of women's effective economic and cultural agency as printers and writers.

Within recent feminist literary history, the woman writer has usually meant more than a woman who wrote: it means a woman who wrote *as* a woman. Such a literary history usually entails a certain way of reading the texts written by women. Thus, pride of place is given to a certain concept of writing: its goals are to achieve recognition as an author; stabilize personal identity, and forge connections with the lives and writing of other women. To state these themes for reading women writers is to confront the essential modernity of such a project. As many scholars have argued, author-

ship only becomes a recognizably modern category over the course of the long eighteenth century; personal identity is an obsession of twentieth-century forms of subjectivity; and the ideas of the essential commonality of women writers is the project of a twentieth-century literary history and biography. But here I would like to avoid a possible misunderstanding. I'm not speaking up for an empirical, foundational concept of history as the record of what "really happened." Each age inevitably rewrites history according to its own needs and desires (Nietzsche, "The Advantage and Disadvantage of History to Human Life"). Bringing modern concerns to early modern women writers has been most illuminating. It demonstrates the way early modern women writers anticipated modern critiques of patriarchal bias, and it has enabled a generation of scholars to study the pre-history of the more modern concerns with authorship, identity, and literary sisterhood. A critical feminist literary history, however, will also use the alterity of the archive to test and critique its own modernist impulses, the residue of blindness that shadows the truths it lays bear. The most scrupulous work in that archive, and the most self-critical feminist literary history, will put at risk the modernist category of the woman writer used to frame and initiate scholarly work.

By comparing two editorial approaches to one novel, I hope to clarify how the concept of the "women writer" can obscure writing by a woman, or, conversely, open the pathway to a more rigorous reading of writers who were women. The 1987, Penguin Virago Classic edition of Behn's first, longest, and most important novel—*Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister*—is an excellent example of work designed to reclaim women's voices. In the first edition after a publishing hiatus of over two hundred years, its editor, Maureen Duffy made a simple but important decision: she strips away Behn's three epistolary dedications, written in 1684, 1685, and 1687, and placed in the front of each novel-length installment of the story. Each epistle dedicatory is addressed to a different, prominent male royalist, at three discrete moments of the Succession crisis. Why does Duffy do this? Such a procedure is consistent with the feminist aims of the Virago series, and Duffy's wish to tender a claim on behalf of Behn as "our first real novelist" (viii). Penguin offers

this rational for the publication of the "Virago Modern Classics": "dedicated to the celebration of women writers and to the rediscovery and reprinting of their works . . . in their variety and richness [the Virago Modern Classics] promise to confuse forever the question of what women's fiction is about, while at the same time affirming a true female tradition in literature" (Headnote to LL Penguin edition). Removing Behn's dedications from her novels certainly does "confuse" what this woman's fiction "is about," but in ways that are not as exhilarating or expanding as Virago intends. Maureen Duffy's edition of *Love Letters* realizes the aims of the Virago Modern Classics in several different ways. She makes available the first modern edition of a novel which had almost entirely vanished from the archive. She enhances *Love Letters's* contribution to a separate female tradition by excising dedications which link the text to a "male" political culture. At the same time she goes far beyond "celebration" of a separate "female tradition in literature" to argue that *Love Letters* is the first real novel in England: ". . . her first known and longest work of fiction . . . is the forerunner of the eighteenth-century 'histories' [of Defoe, Richardson and Fielding], which critical studies generally reckoned to be the first true novels. . . . [T]his . . . is important . . . if we are to realize the full significance of her achievement and advance the claim for her to be reinstated as our first real novelist" (viii).

How is this larger claim supported? In order to represent Behn as our first real novelist, Duffy edits the novel so that Behn's three sequential novels conform as much as possible to what the novel came to be after its institution within literary studies: a work that subordinates its invocation of history to its fictionality; gives priority to private and domestic concerns over any political and public ones; and provides consistent characters moving through a unified plot disclosing a focused set of themes—all allowing readers to divine the coherent design of the author. In order to shift *Love Letters* toward this modern understanding of the novel, Duffy excises the most direct expressions of Behn's intention—the three dedications published with each installment of the novel. There are several ways their presence would vitiate *Love Letters's* generic identity as a modern novel, and thus compromise Behn's greatness as a woman writer: the

dedications describe each novel's inscription within a historical crisis; take up an overtly polemical relation to that crisis; and interpret its private love story of loyalty and betrayal as an allegory of a nation's relation to its monarch. The removal of the dedications have this additional effect: they allow the three parts of the novel to fall more closely together, so the three-novels-as-one-novel appears as something much more compatible with modern literary sensibilities: one novel in three parts.

Isn't there something perverse about this? Here two categories—"the novel" as literature and "the woman writer" as part of a separate tradition—are being imposed anachronistically upon the texts of Behn so as to filter out and obscure what her texts are doing in her culture: engaging the political and ethical questions about vows, sexual license, liberty, and pleasure provoked by the Succession Crisis. In order to construct Behn as the woman writer who authored the first English novel, Duffy, and the Penguin Virago Classics, must domesticate her: separate her from the political and popular print culture within which she wrote.

When Janet Todd edits *Love Letters* as Volume 2 of *The Works of Aphra Behn*, Todd reverses Duffy's editorial excisions. Todd restores the three separate dedications to the three parts of *Love Letters*, and she identifies the three royalist dedicatees in her "Textual Introduction." This rigorous bibliography helps to restore the political contexts that occasioned Behn's authorship, and push the critical reader toward questions that vex the stability of the category woman writer: how can Behn make herself such an unqualified champion of heterosexual love, even to the point of incestuous transgression? How can we reconcile the Behn who champions Stuart monarchical authority with the Behn who challenges the patriarchal control of fathers over daughters? These ideas are on display in the dedications, and are also central to the novels they introduce. By returning Behn to the full complexity of her historical roles, Todd's wise editorial decision also vexes the familiar modern idea that Behn's writing was centrally motivated by the wish to be "woman writer" or "first English novelist."

Those many feminist literary histories that have achieved a culturally and historically informed study of writers who

were women have uncovered more factors that vitiate the stability of the category "woman writer." Feminist literary history has shown that the texts written by women, like every other text, are traversed by the many different factors and forces that work in a common economy of culture: for example, the print market, the history of authorship, the ethical value of sympathy, various political and religious convulsions, etc. Along the way, particular women writers develop multiple, complex, and quite various forms of indebtedness and entanglement with male writers, friends, family, and rivals. Certain broad cultural movements—such as the emergence of novel reading as a central form of early modern entertainment—seem to involve a complex (sometimes involuntary and unconscious) collaboration among men and women writers. Thus, to take an example from my own book, *Licensing Entertainment: the Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain, 1684-1750*, the novels of amorous intrigue written by Behn, Manley, and Haywood between 1683 and 1730, become, by my account, incorporated and disavowed within the novels of Richardson and Fielding in the 1740s. Then the novels of these two men—and especially those of Richardson—are taken up and rewritten by women writers of the next fifty years.

Richardson is a particularly vexing problem for those seeking to narrate a separate tradition of women's writing. In the hallways of the American Society for Eighteenth Century Studies, I've heard prominent feminist literary historians suggest this ingenious solution: "It would be relatively easy to assemble a coherent and separate tradition of women's novelistic writing, from Behn to Austen, if we could just do a sex change operation on Richardson." Richardson's influence over women's writing extends from his moral reform of the novel (of course brilliantly disputed by both Fielding and Haywood) and his close alliances with and support for young women writers (Elizabeth Carter, Hester Chapone, Elizabeth Montagu, Charlotte Lennox, etc.), to his leading role in what has been called "the sentimental revolution." Richardson's writing also traverses the career of those who shunned his particular ways of writing, such as Eliza Haywood. Thus, although the Richardsonian sentimental reform of novel reading casts Haywood's early and highly influential novels

of amorous intrigue into disrepute, this does not stop Haywood from accepting the terms of that reform (quite explicitly, for example, in her *Female Spectator*) and then successfully publishing novels, such as *The History of Miss Betsy Thoughtless*, consistent with the new, widely accepted idea that novels should promote moral improvement of the reader. There is a paradox at the center of literary history of women's writing: the very literary history which discloses a biased subordination or erasure of certain women writers—in this case, the "notorious trio" of Behn, Manley, and Haywood as too explicit in their treatment of sex, and therefore rejected by both men and women novelists in the second half of the century—also suggests the reciprocal influence of men and women writers. Paradoxically, if we cleave too rigorously to a category of "women writer," as, for example, a respectable female author seeking recognition as a writer of literature, then that very idea becomes an obstacle to reading early novels of amorous intrigue by women, and doing a cultural history of the novel which will include them.

How did it come to seem inevitable and necessary to study women who write in literary histories that sequester them into a literary history of their own? At the center of feminist literary histories since Gilbert and Gubar's path-breaking *Mad Woman in the Attic* is this simple critical procedure: assembling a series of women writers in order to discern a set of common and variant traits. Since women have written most feminist literary histories, this procedure performs what it describes. The truth-value of this procedure becomes self-confirming: "that which is assembled together, resembles each other" (Mallarmé). In countless monographs and dissertations written since 1979, feminist critics and literary historians have followed what amounts to a generic convention for this new kind of criticism: string together a series of women writers and demonstrate what they have in common and how they differ. For the way it submits to the rules of this type of critical writing, and puts it under stress, Catherine Gallagher's *Nobody's Story: the Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1670-1820* offers me a way to suggest what is both illuminating and limiting about this genre. In Gallagher's ingenious narrative of the woman writer, the disadvantages of women under patriarchy—that

she is a comparative “nobody,” that “nothing” is slang for female genitals—allow women writers to exploit, in various and inventive ways, the advantages of being a “nobody.” Thus, a female “nobody” finds herself ready to enter into commerce with the nothingness that is at the heart of both the market (as exchange value) and authorship (as personae, copyright, literary reputations, fictional characters).

Gallagher’s is a nuanced and complex story that offers valuable critical readings of of Behn, Manley, Lennox, Burney, and Edgeworth. Along the way, Gallagher topples many of the sacred cows of an earlier feminist literary history: that women wrote alone, without the collaboration or help of men; that women writers shunned the disrespectability of publicity and the market; that women were weak, silenced, and disabled by lack of education or public shaming, and so on. Because Gallagher’s work is informed by post-structuralist theory, her readings suggest that the difficulty of stabilizing the “woman writer” does not just come from the differences among women, but also from the general traits of writing: writing drifts; is borrowed; circulates; can be quoted; pluralizes meaning (Derrida, *Grammatology*). In short, writing falls away from its putative origin into new texts and contexts, thereby failing to stabilize an identity—whether it is an identity of gender, class, or race; therefore, it is difficult to secure writing as one’s “own.”

Although *Nobody’s Story* deconstructs many of the assumptions of the literary history of women’s writing, it still observes the law of its genre: it is structured by the goal of isolating the traits of women’s writing, and discovers, along the way, the special value of women’s writing to modern culture. Gallagher argues that women writers, by having an especially compelling commerce with stories of “nobody,” and by developing the sympathetic identification readers could have with fictional nobodies, play a decisive role in inventing the modern concept of fiction. This thesis is developed in a chapter devoted to Charlotte Lennox. Unlike Manley’s disguised fictions about “Somebodies” who are identifiable by consulting the Key, the plenitude of detail in Lennox’s *Female Quixote* suggests that “the particulars of the novel character have no extra-textual existence” (Gallagher 174). For me the issue is not whether Lennox (or Richardson or Fielding) is most responsible for the

shift Gallagher rather convincingly documents: the consolidation of the concept of fiction in the middle of the eighteenth century in Britain. Once the uses of verisimilitude within fiction have been grasped, all three writers show a sense of the need to blend truth and fiction in their narratives. Thus, for example, when William Warburton’s preface to the second installment of *Clarissa* is too open about its fictionality, Richardson complains that such explicitness spoils “that kind of Historical Faith which Fiction itself is generally read with, though we know it to be Fiction” (Richardson, *Selected Letters* 85 [April 19, 1748]). However, I don’t think any of these eighteenth-century British novelists invents the concept or practice of fiction. The following texts provide examples of the sophistication of pre-eighteenth-century concepts of fiction: the quotation from Francis Bacon on fiction that John Dunlop offers near the beginning of his *History of Fiction* (3 vols. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1814); the manifesto for fiction addressed “To the Reader” by “J.D.” as an introduction to Honore d’Urfe’s heroic romance *L’Astree* (French version, 1607-1627, English translation, 1657) and echoed in later discussion of the pleasure of fiction in Madame de Scudery’s *Clelia* (Fr. 1654-1661; English translation 1678 [Folger Collective, *Women Critics 1600-1820* 2-5]). Thus, the new currency of fiction in the British mid-century was less an invention than a rediscovery. In short, credit for the development of the concept of fiction will have to be shared with earlier writers, non-British writers, and male writers. It is a cultural development impossible to tell within the confines of a literary history of women’s writing.

I would like to end with a paradox that seems to have emerged from the historical rigor of feminist literary history. While the concept of “the woman writer” seemed to authorize the separatist literary histories conceived in her name, the range, depth, and surprises of those histories have gradually put in question the coherence of the category of “the woman writer.” Perhaps it may some day weaken the still widely felt imperative to write monographs which, by separating women writers into a critical work of their own, make the gender of the writer their most essential and pertinent trait.

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