

CAMBRIDGE

CONTEXTS IN LITERATURE

Women's Writing: past and present

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Zilboorg**

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1 Reading women writers

- What is women's writing?
- Which female authors are important?
- What ideas, traditions and history are significant for understanding women's writing?
- How is literature by women separate or different from literature by men?

The difficulties facing women writers

There was a time when many readers might well have thought that there were almost no women writers. Until recently, in fact, literature by women was nearly excluded from the literary **canon**, those important works with which people were traditionally expected to be familiar. There were, of course, a few notable exceptions such as Jane Austen and the Brontës, but the statistics are startling. In his essay 'The Sociology of Authorship: The Social Origins, Education, and Occupations of 1,100 British Writers, 1800–1935' (1962, in *Writers, Readers, and Occasions: Selected Essays on Victorian Literature and Life*, 1989), Richard Altick discovered that, on the basis of books published in Britain between 1800 and 1935, the proportion of female to male writers was fairly consistent at a disappointing 20 per cent, but when one looks at anthologies and book lists for university and college courses – in other words, samples of work theoretically chosen on the basis of literary interest and merit – the statistics are even worse. In 1971, Tillie Olsen (b. 1913) noted that 'Achievement' as 'gauged by what supposedly designates it' came to 'one woman writer for every 12 men (8 per cent women, 92 per cent men)' (from *Silences*, 1978). Feminist efforts over the past 30 years have made a significant difference in the number of women writers published and in the number of texts by women included on courses, but representation is still far from equal for a great many reasons. Even in the *New Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), in which the proportion of women represented has doubled, the increase is only from five to ten per cent.

- ▶ Make your own survey about women writers included in (a) a bookshop display window; (b) a list of required or recommended books for a course; (c) a literary anthology; (d) a list of your own or a friend's favourite authors or books or stories or poems. What do these sources tell you about the attitudes, interests and values of their creators? What 'messages' about women's writing do they convey?

In her important book *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf (1882–1941) pointed out that it is difficult to make a lasting name for oneself as a male or female writer in any age. A person needs to be literate for a start. In the centuries before the written word – and long afterwards, as well – there was, of course, an **oral tradition** of songs and poems, legends and stories, anecdotes and myths. These have come down to us as folklore or fairy tales, **ballads** and even **epics**, but they are preserved for us to read because someone somewhere at some point wrote them down. Those writers may or may not have remained nameless, but they are not the actual authors, the originators, of the texts they inscribed. Indeed, in 1897 Samuel Butler wrote an entire book arguing that the author of *The Odyssey* – which scholars now agree was probably an oral epic long before being written down in the 4th century BCE – was not in fact Homer, the blind male poet, but a female author (*The Authoress of the Odyssey: where and when she wrote, who she was, the use she made of the Iliad, & how the poem grew under her hands*). Virginia Woolf even contended, 'Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman.'

In order for a text to endure, not only must its author or someone else write it down, but it must be published, and publication is seldom easy. Before the invention of the printing press in about 1440, 'publication' meant the careful copying out of a text by a scribe, who was usually paid by a nobleman for this work and who, by the early medieval period in Europe, may well have been a monk. This means of preserving a literary work meant that the nobleman or the Christian Church had to decide if the text were worth the time, care and money involved in this kind of publication. That is, a sort of filtering or censorship dependent on class, religious belief and gender became an inseparable part of the preservation of literary works.

► Look at an ancient or medieval manuscript. Many are available to view in museums or are reproduced in modern books, but you might also look at a selection reproduced on the Internet, for instance on such websites as:

- Early Manuscripts at Oxford University at <http://image.ox.ac.uk>
- Some Medieval Manuscripts at <http://www.physics.ohio-state.edu/~prewett/medieval.html>
- Royal Library of Copenhagen–Medieval Manuscripts at <http://www.kb.dk/elib/mss/mdr/index-en.htm>

What time and care do you think went into these manuscripts? What evidence do you find of the interests, status and values of the scribe who copied the text or the patron who paid for it? What is the particular text about? Who do you suppose read

this text? What sort of author do you suppose wrote it? What can you conclude about it which might help you to understand women writers?

This ‘censorship’ did not end with the printing press and the more efficient means of printing that developed during the **Industrial Revolution** that followed. To get into print, many female authors took **pseudonyms**, that hid their identities. George Eliot (1819–1880), the name by which Mary Ann Evans is still known, took a male pseudonym. The Brontës’ work originally appeared under pseudonyms that were intentionally ambiguous in gender: Charlotte (1816–1855), Emily (1818–1848) and Anne Brontë (1820–1849) initially published as Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell.

Even if a writer does manage to get published, however, there are the additional problems of reaching sympathetic readers and keeping a work in print. The first edition of poems by the Brontë sisters sold only two copies, while the Romantic poet John Keats (1795–1821) received so much negative criticism of his work that he was sure it would go out of print and no one would remember it. On his grave in Rome, the **epitaph** he requested appears under his name: ‘Here lies one whose name was writ in water.’ Many texts by women, because of adverse criticism or neglect, have gone out of print and are thus now ‘lost’ to us.

Sometimes women cannot finish their work or withhold it from publication. As the literary critic Ellen Moers points out at the very beginning of *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (1977), ‘A woman’s life is hard’: she must often take care of the household, bear children, and serve her husband’s needs – not activities that give a person the leisure and calm required for creative work. Under these circumstances, if a woman does write, she is apt to chose **genres** that many readers may not be used to considering as serious literature – for example, letters, diaries or travel journals. Indeed, as Woolf points out in *A Room of One’s Own*, until recently many women who managed to write were childless – for instance, Jane Austen and the Brontës. Further, few female writers married, or if they did, they married late – for example, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot. However, even when women did write, they were frequently prevented from finishing what they started: Tillie Olsen began her novel *Yonnondio* (1974) in the 1930s, but the demands placed upon her by the need to earn money, as well as to care for a family that eventually included six children, made her reluctantly put the work aside. When she finally published it 40 years later, she was unable to pick up where she had left off and the text remains unfinished. Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) left behind 1,775 completed poems, but only seven of these were published during her lifetime. None of these appeared in the form in which she had written them – editors changed her punctuation and even her individual words – so it is perhaps understandable that Dickinson carefully kept back the remaining 1,768 poems, stitched together in little booklets and stored secretly in a trunk in her bedroom.

Women writers may also feel that their work is not important, not worth publishing, preserving or even finishing at all. Consider, for instance, the

implications for women's writing of such traditional advice to women as that offered by Ban Zhao (c. 45–110), a female teacher during the Han dynasty in China (see Part 3: Texts and extracts, page 80). The modern American poet Adrienne Rich has written of 'self-trivialisation' as one of the ways in which women writers throughout history have been taught to 'destroy themselves'. Specifically, Rich contends that women often fall into the trap of:

... Believing the lie that women are not capable of major creations. Not taking ourselves or our work seriously enough; always finding the needs of others more demanding than our own. Being content to produce intellectual or artistic work in which we imitate men, in which we lie to ourselves and each other, in which we do not press to our fullest possibilities, to which we fail to give the attention and hard work we would give to a child or a lover.

(from 'Anne Sexton: 1928–1974' [1974] in
On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966–1978, 1979)

Throughout the ages, women have often been treated and taught to think of themselves as children; for example, in 1912, when the Titanic was sinking, the policy was 'women and children first'. Indeed, people have often thought that women, like children, 'should be seen and not heard'.

In *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (1983), Joanna Russ (b. 1937) has written explicitly about the ways literature by women has been discounted. People have said such things as:

She didn't write it.
She wrote it, but she shouldn't have.
She wrote it, but look what she wrote about.
She wrote it, but 'she' isn't really an artist and 'it' isn't really serious, of the right genre – i.e., really art.
She wrote it, but she wrote only one of it.
She wrote it, but it's only interesting/included in the canon for one, limited reason.
She wrote it, but there are very few of her ...
She wrote it, but she doesn't fit in ...
She's wonderful, but where on earth did she come from?

The contexts for women's writing

For many reasons texts by women cannot be considered outside the dominant literary tradition that includes texts by men. Certainly, throughout history, women

writers have been aware of established literary conventions as well as of works by their male contemporaries. A woman writer looking for a role model finds numerous literary examples, among them the many female characters who are writers or speakers in texts by men: for instance, the Wife of Bath in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (c. 1400); Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth; Samuel Richardson's Clarissa in his novel *Clarissa* (1748–1749); or James Joyce's Molly Bloom in *Ulysses* (1922). In fact, in literature written by men, female characters of all sorts – the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene in the Bible; Eve as she appears not only in the Bible but in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667); Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850); Anna in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1873–1877); Emma in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) – offer another context within which to consider writing by women, as do works by men written from a woman's point of view, for instance, Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) or Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street* (1920).

However, there is also the context of an often but not necessarily or completely alternative 'tradition' of women's writing. It is this tradition that Woolf insists on when she writes, in *A Room of One's Own*, '... we think back through our mothers if we are women' and asserts that 'if you consider any great figure of the past, like Sappho, like the Lady Murasaki, like Emily Brontë, you will find that she is an inheritor as well as an originator, and has come into existence because women have come to have the habit of writing ...'. In other words, women's writing is both a part of the literature of any period *and* a counterpoint to it, even a separate body of writing. Cultural history and specifically literary history are thus inevitable contexts for understanding texts by female authors.

Early women writers

Classical Greek and Latin literature offers a context for later women writers just as these early literatures offer important background for an understanding of, for example, the Irish author James Joyce, who based his novel *Ulysses* on Homer's *Odyssey*. Women who wrote before the Renaissance drew on earlier traditions with which modern readers may be unfamiliar. Part of the fascination of these early authors lies in discovering the historical contexts we need in order to understand their values and views of the world, as well as their use of language and the genres in which they wrote.

Sappho

The ancient Greek poet Sappho (c. 620–550 BCE), who lived on the island of Lesbos, is often cited as the first and even the greatest woman writer. We know that she led a circle of female disciples, but we have little information about her. Her work survives only as two short poems and several fragments quoted by later

admiring critics. We do know, however, that most of her writing was love poetry and that she wrote **epigrams**.

Consider the following translation, entitled 'To Atthis' (1914), by the English poet Richard Aldington (1892–1962). The poem is so close to a literal translation of the original that Aldington excluded it from his *Collected Poems* (1948):

Atthis, far from me and Mnasidika,
Dwells in Sardis;
Many times she was near us
So that we lived life well
Like the far-famed goddess
Whom above all things music delighted.

And now she is first among the Lydian women
As the mighty sun, the rose-fingered moon,
Beside the great stars ...

This poem's intense and controlled emotion, expressed in language that seems wholly natural, is characteristic of Sappho's work, as is the subject: love, specifically here love between female friends. Yet which words in this poem suggest that knowledge of the ancient world might help us to understand it better? We might, for example, want to look at a map: Where is Sardis? Where is Lydia? Where is Lesbos? Thinking about where Sappho wrote, we might understand that when the word 'lesbian' is applied to Sappho, it carries more than one meaning, suggesting the island where she lived as well as her various feelings, as indicated in this poem, for the women who were her close friends. Reading Aldington's translation, we might also want to know more about the early Greeks' regard for music: Sappho's speaker clearly admires the goddess who delights in music (probably Athena), while the poet herself seems to value music as one of the highest arts. We might ask as well about Classical attitudes towards astronomy and astrology, for by comparing Atthis to 'the mighty sun' and 'the rose-fingered moon' and by placing her 'Beside the great stars', Sappho appears to be praising her very highly. We might also want to know more about the Greeks' attitudes towards love, and we might want to do some research on the subject of love poetry and specifically women's love poetry: what sort of literary tradition is there, for which Sappho may be the beginning? We may realise, too, that we cannot fully appreciate a poem if we have to rely on a translation.

Now consider the first two stanzas of 'Fragment Thirty- Six' (1924), by the American poet H.D. (Hilda Doolittle, 1886–1961), who married Richard Aldington in 1913. H.D.'s poem is a very free 'translation' and an expansion of a single line (*'I know not what to do: my mind is divided'*), all that we have of one of Sappho's verses:

I know not what to do,
my mind is reft:
is song's gift best?
is love's gift loveliest?
I know not what to do,
now sleep has pressed
weight on your eyelids.

Shall I break your rest,
devouring, eager?
is love's gift best?
nay, song's the loveliest:
yet were you lost,
what rapture
could I take from song?
what song were left?
(from *Collected Poems*, ed. Louis Martz, 1983)

Like 'To Atthis', 'Fragment Thirty-Six' seems to be about both love and music, but unlike Aldington, who anchors his translation in a specific Classical time and place, H.D. chooses to focus her version of Sappho on an inner conflict. While Aldington's poem stresses the speaker's relationship with a female friend, in H.D.'s poem the gender of the speaker and particularly of the sleeping lover are unclear. Since, however, it seems that Sappho is the speaker of her fragment, we can infer that H.D.'s speaker is also female, that she is – like Sappho and like H.D. – a woman writer. But what is H.D.'s speaker divided about? Why should love and 'song' be in conflict? In what ways may H.D. be speaking here about any woman writer's conflict rather than only about Sappho's divided mind – or even her own? We may not be able to answer these questions in a conclusive way, but the fact that H.D.'s poem make us ask them emphasises Sappho's continuing significance and points to a tradition of women writers confronting similar questions.

Translation

By focusing her energies on a text by Sappho in 'Fragment Thirty-Six', H.D. associates her writing with Sappho's and places her own contemporary work within a tradition of women's writing dating back to Sappho's time. Translation – or even just reading earlier women writers seriously – helps to define a tradition of women writers. In discussing the subject of translation in *Literary Women*, Ellen Moers goes so far as to say that

... whoever wants to take the subject of women's love poetry seriously must know many languages, for the subject must carry them from Sappho to the saints, in the days when the poetry of spiritual love reveled in the imagery of marriage with Christ. There are French, Italian and Spanish women poets to be read seriously; and Russian would be absolutely essential, for Anna Akhmatova [1888–1966] used love poetry as her principal vehicle for ideas of a philosophical and historical cast.

Such efforts also make us aware of the long and rich historical context within which we can read later female authors and within which we can orient ourselves as female or male readers. For example, in order to write her poem 'Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff' (1975–1976) the American poet Adrienne Rich (b. 1929) translated letters between the German artist Paula Becker (1876–1907), married to the painter Otto Modersohn, and Clara Westhoff (1878–1954), her friend and fellow artist, who married the poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926). Rich's poem, a **dramatic monologue** told from Becker's point of view, reveals the artist's feelings as she anticipates the birth of her child: 'I didn't want this child./ You're the only one I've told./ I want a child, maybe, someday, but not now.' Becker realises that having a child will make painting more difficult for her, perhaps impossible. She is upset when she dreams that after her death Rilke will write a poem about her claiming her as his friend; in Rich's poem Paula tells Clara, 'I was your friend', and insists that Clara 'of all people/... will hear all I say and cannot say'. Rich makes her 'translation' even more powerful by placing it in its specific biographical context: she prefaces this poem with a short account of her 'characters', telling us that Paula Becker died in a haemorrhage after childbirth.

Male writers like Richard Aldington, who learnt at school the Greek he needed for 'To Atthis', also use translation as a way of situating their work within a larger historical context and within the established literary tradition. For example, Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809–1892), the popular Victorian poet laureate, based his 'Ulysses' (1842) on Homer's *Odyssey* and on Dante's account in *The Divine Comedy* (1305–1321), and presented his own narrative of the ancient hero's return to Greece. Later Tennyson retold the legend of King Arthur and his knights in his *Idylls of the King* (1869). More recently, the British poet laureate Ted Hughes (1930–1999) published translations of classical myths in his *Tales from Ovid* (1997) as well as a translation of a play by the 17th-century French dramatist Jean Racine, *Phaedra* (1998), while in 2000 the Irish poet Seamus Heaney (b. 1939), a Nobel Prize winner, published *Beowulf*, his poetic retelling of the Old English epic. Such efforts, however, by well-educated and highly regarded male writers at the peak of their careers seem qualitatively different from what women writers are doing.

Murasaki and Li Ch'ing-chao

It is not only the heritage of writing in English nor even the western literary tradition that provides a context for reading past and present women writers. Other cultures, as Moers indicates, have strong and influential traditions of literature, as the writing of *The Lady Murasaki* (978–1031), one of Japan's most admired authors, illustrates. Her long fictional work, *The Tale of the Genji*, tells of complex romantic relationships at the 11th-century Japanese court. Known widely in the west through translations, Murasaki's account reveals a skilful female author writing about the intricacies of courtship rituals as she analyses women's and men's roles in a highly conventional male-dominated society.

Li Ch'ing-chao (1084–1151), whose name in the western alphabet is sometimes spelled 'Li Qingzhao', is one of the most celebrated Chinese woman poets. Two centuries before the invention of the printing press in Europe, the Chinese had developed printing into an efficient art. Indeed, many social and economic changes in China at this time had an important impact on women's lives. As Patricia Buckley Ebrey points out in *The Cambridge Illustrated History of China* (1996): 'With printing and the expansion of the educated class, more women were taught to read and write. It was not at all uncommon in the educated class for wives to be able to write letters and tutor their young children.' Li Ch'ing-chao's poetry achieved a significant popularity; a modern critic, Liu Wu-chi, contends that her poems 'compare well with the works of her contemporaries, among whom, though a woman, she ranks supreme'. Indeed, she 'succeeded in depicting the emotions and vicissitudes of a young woman. Many Chinese poets have attempted to delve into the inner recesses of the female mind ... but they fall short in the presentation of a genuine woman's feeling with all its intimacy, delicacy and immediacy. In this respect, Li Ch'ing-chao's poems are unmatched.' (from *An Introduction to Chinese Literature*, 1966)

- Consider the two translations (Part 3, pages 80–81) of a poem by Li Ch'ing-chao, based apparently on her own experience as a young wife after her husband's departure from home. What differences do you notice in the two versions? Which one do you feel does a better job of capturing 'a genuine woman's feeling with all its intimacy, delicacy and immediacy'? What in Li Ch'ing-chao's poem seems part of her particular time and place? What seems to you especially characteristic of women's experience? What seems universal?

Julian of Norwich

As Moers suggests, readers examining the historical context of women's writing on love would need to look at women writers who focus not just on romantic love, as Murasaki and Li Ch'ing-chao do, but on the love of God and, in the West, specifically on writing about their own perceptions of their relationship to Jesus.

Saint Theresa of Ávila (1515–1582) is only one of many medieval and **Renaissance** women who portrayed themselves as ‘brides’ of Christ and who used the passionate language of love to explain their feelings towards God. Julian of Norwich (c. 1342–?) is one of the first female writers to write in English, and she described in *A Book of Showings* her direct experiences of God’s goodness, which she received through a series of religious visions. Dame (or Mother) Julian uses the language of paternal and especially maternal love to express her feelings. Thus she writes:

As truly as God is our Father, so truly is God our Mother ...

I understand three ways of contemplating motherhood in God. The first is the foundation of our nature’s creation; the second is his taking of our nature, where the motherhood of grace begins; the third is the motherhood at work. And in that, by the same grace, everything is penetrated, in length and in breadth, in height and in depth without end; and it is all one love.

(modernised by Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, from
A Book of Showings, 1978)

Dame Julian’s feminine **images** here may strike us as startling, but they are not so radical at they may at first seem. While ‘mother Jesus’ was in fact a fairly common idea in the medieval period, *A Book of Showings* is significant in emphasising the unique meaning that Jesus has for women, whose spirituality and creativity this author explains through images of conception, birth and nurturing.

Margery Kemp

Margery Kemp (1373?–1438?) was another early English female writer who wrote an account of her spiritual life, *The Book of Margery Kemp*, in which she chronicled her intimate relationship to God in personal and erotic terms. After 20 years of marriage and the birth of 14 children, Kemp left her husband and ‘married’ Christ, recounting her decision as well as her struggle to persuade her husband to renounce their union. The first English autobiography written in the **vernacular**, Kemp’s account of her visions and pilgrimages as far as Jerusalem reveals its speaker as a feisty woman, clever and committed, forceful and intense. Her work gives readers a vivid sense not only of her own character but of daily life in 15th-century England. Consider this conversation between Kemp and her husband, as she tries to persuade him to allow her to dedicate herself to God:

She then asked her husband what was the cause that he had not meddled with her for eight weeks, since she lay with him every night in his bed. He said he was made so afraid when he would have touched her, that he dare do no more.