
Pro Rege

Volume 28 | Number 1

Article 3

September 1999

Literature and Feminism: Critical Quests and Questions

Helen Petter Westra

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege



Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Westra, Helen Petter (1999) "Literature and Feminism: Critical Quests and Questions," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 28: No. 1, 24 - 33.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol28/iss1/3

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Literature and Feminism: Critical Quests and Questions



by Helen Petter Westra

It is a commonplace that literary criticism in the last several decades has vaulted far beyond the boundaries of the once preferred and highly revered New Critical approach of textual analysis that focused on a work to discover its single most correct or universal meaning. Contemporary critical theory as a discipline now offers a virtual smorgasbord of approaches—structural, linguistic, psychological, cultural, historical, mythological, ideological—with which to explore literary texts,

Dr. Helen Petter Westra is Professor of English at Grand Valley State University, Allendale, Michigan. She presented her paper at Dordt College in Fall, 1998.

authorial voices, and the contexts and values that shape a literary work. And not surprisingly, in recent years there has also been much scholarly debate about the relative merits of the many critical frameworks (psychoanalytical, Marxist, reader-response, post-structuralist, genre theory, narratology, deconstructionist, post-colonial, African-American, feminist, etc.) available to students of literature today.

To be cordially invited to this institution to share part of my own journey in exploring some of the positive connections between literature and feminism is encouraging evidence that this college, in addressing a world of challenge and change, has consciously moved beyond narrow views of the type I received on several student evaluations in the mid-1980's when I taught here: "She's way too interested in woman's stuff." "She says we shouldn't write 'He' or 'Man' when we mean everybody, and she even uses a grammar textbook by a woman!" "Why do I have to read these women authors anyway?"

In the liberal arts as well as the sciences, we have come to recognize that conventions or protocols long ago established as fundamental to the understanding, treatment, representations, or views of "man" (males as the standard for all of humanity) can not without careful testing, analysis, and comparisons be routinely applied to the study of women. This recognition in pharmacology and medicine, for example, has saved and enhanced innumerable lives. In literature this awareness, if not as visibly dramatic, has been nonetheless substantial.

I do not speak for (or categorically admire) all feminists. However, as a Christian woman and scholar, I, along with many others in the teaching profession, have been significantly influenced by the opportunities literary feminism has provided to revisit and amend the history of literature and to ponder questions and answers that have offered a deeper, richer and, I believe, more accurate and faithful understanding of literature, humanity, and the world. As a specialist in Early American literature, I have found the work of literary feminists, particularly those whose efforts to esteem women within a wider literary and social context do not deny or exclude men and family, to be useful and illuminating.

Perhaps some details from my own development, while not unusual or dramatic, may provide a context for the journey I have taken toward Christian feminism. As a young child, I grew up in the safety of small midwest towns, eight of my youthful years in Iowa. Early on, I was nurtured by the love of devout, God-fearing parents and the guidance of kindly Christian teachers and librarians who opened far-away vistas to me through the avenue of books. As I matured, I was also blessed by the examples of strong women, including two aunts—both persons of remarkable piety, intelligence, and courage—whose missionary visions called them beyond the Christian Reformed denomination and North America; their views of servanthood and work in God's world were an encouragement to me later when I was offered opportunities to teach in Communist China and Hindu Nepal and in public as well as Christian institutions of higher learning in this country.

Nevertheless, in my liberal arts education at a Christian college in the late 1950s, it was a rare experience for me as an undergraduate English major to read texts or literature written by women. I remember late night talks with other coeds pondering, in voices tinged with regret or embarrassment, the ironies of why there seemed to be no truly worthy or laudable tradition of women writers in America, this land of opportunity and freedom. Occasionally one of our professors might make a passing judgment on the sentimental novels of ante-bellum women, the eccentricities of Emily Dickinson, or the subversive notions of "rebel" writers such as Margaret Fuller or Gertrude Stein.

But it was to be many years later before I would begin to discover that there *was* indeed a commendable, praiseworthy tradition in America of writing by women, a long and brave and sturdy one that required no apology or embarrassment.

While a graduate student in the 1960's and 70's, I was absorbed in American studies and eventually a dissertation that required extensive reading in colonial and early American literature to familiarize myself with the chief cultural issues of that period. As a minister's daughter, I felt on familiar ground working with Puritan writers and their theological and ecclesiastical writings. But, as the journals I kept during that time reveal, I lamented the absence of women's voices among the many authors I explored. In my course work, writings by colonial women were for the most part invisible, in spite of the fact that the birth of a women's literary tradition in America had occurred at least as early as 1650—when Anne Bradstreet's volume of poems was published without her knowledge by a relative. A mother of eight children, Bradstreet gleaned time from sleep and household chores to create epic-scale quaternions and a grandly impressive history of world monarchies. Her remarkable achievement became the first book of American poetry; but with its publication came the reminders, no doubt painful to her, that many "carping tongues" considered the idea of a woman writer "obnoxious" and that many in her new world Puritan community believed men's hands were made for pens while the female "hand a needle better fits." Undeterred, she faced the indignities of being judged by those who "say our [female] sex is void of reason"(7, 8), and she expanded her writing to include elegant love poems and meditations as well as delicate lyrics of grief and loss. Obviously, this highly literate woman felt an urgent need to shape and express in writing her consciousness of God's sovereignty and of his presence in the tumult of her life.

In the journals I kept during my graduate school years, I still have some of the observations I made on the few women writers, such as Bradstreet, I did encounter. Reading transcriptions of Anne Hutchinson's trial, I felt astonishment at the keenness of her mind, the vigor and eloquence of her voice, and at the palpable anger in the men's arguments against her, stressing that she had no

right to speak *because* she was a woman. There are notes I made, too, of how my face burned while reading John Winthrop's judgments on a colonial woman, a Mrs. Edward Hopkins, who, as Winthrop tells it, had "fallen into a sad infirmity, the loss of her understanding and reason." He asserts without question that her condition was due to "her giving herself wholly to reading" and to writing "many books." And, said he, "if she had attended her household affairs and such things as belong to women, and not gone out of her way and calling to meddle in such things as are proper for men, whose minds are stronger, etc., she had kept her wits and might have improved them usefully and honorably in the place where God had set her" (225).¹

Crossing the Atlantic to America together on the same ship in 1630, the Bradstreets and John Winthrop, Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Company, were well acquainted. It is no small wonder that Anne Bradstreet tried to deflect community criticism, when her poetry was made public, by insisting that her writings were feeble, of little consequence, and could only make men's authorships look the brighter by comparison. Sensitive women like Bradstreet were profoundly aware that, in a patriarchal culture where public and official spheres belonged only to men, women's very acts of writing and publishing appeared as a mark of immodesty or unseemly pride. Thus, for most early American women wanting to escape such censorship, writing privately or publishing anonymously offered a way. For example, Hannah Webster Foster's best-selling and widely reprinted novel, *The Coquette; or, the History of Eliza Wharton*, printed first in 1797 and then repeatedly thereafter, was not identified as hers until after her death in 1866. Such fear of exposure lends at least some credence to Virginia Woolf's remark that the "Anon" who published so many thousands of poems over the centuries was likely a woman—who wished to avoid suppression or ridicule of her texts.

Gradually in my own studies and readings, I found evidence suggesting the very considerable influence women writers played in the American literary tradition. I remember the day I stumbled upon the work of Mary Rowlandson and read it long into the night without stopping. Published in 1682, *A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* contained a lengthy

"Preface" by an ecclesiastical leader attesting to the work's edifying worth and asking that readers "excuse" the "Gentlewoman her self" for making her account "publick" at the request of pious friends (6-7). Rowlandson's *Narrative* is a powerfully detailed and moving first-person account of her three-month captivity by Algonkian Indians. Not only did her book become a colonial best-seller, reprinted often and in several languages, but it also became a principal influence in the development of an indigenous American genre, the so-called Indian captivity narrative. Then there was Hannah Foster, whose novels after the Revolutionary War were literally read to pieces and were on book sellers' lists for the better part of a century. And there was Susannah Rowson, America's first best-selling novelist, who wrote six novels between 1774 and 1799; her best-known work, *Charlotte Temple* (1791), was reprinted eighty (80) times by the mid-eighteen hundreds. And there was also the poet Phillis Wheatley, a brilliant young African-American slave, questioned by Boston's leaders to prove she indeed had written the erudite lyrics that her mistress eventually had published in 1773. And there were more.

For me, the occasions of finding these women writers, however, were discoveries nearly accidental. In all my years of undergraduate and graduate courses (with only one woman among my dozens of literature professors), my reading of the traditional American literary canon between the early seventeenth century and the late nineteenth century had focused almost exclusively on men—with Emily Dickinson sometimes included as an exception to the all male diet.² It was within this literary environment that I, like so many of the women students (the majority in most English classes) who were my peers, quietly wondered, "Why in the 250 years of American literature are there no women writers worthy of serious study?"

Today we know that during America's first several centuries women *did* indeed constitute a distinguished body of writers who *were* read, if not always by a supportive public, then by family members and friends who treasured their words and passed them on through the generations. Annis Boudinot Stockton [1736-1801] is an excellent example of such women: able, witty, profound and prolific, Stockton was a poet well-known among

her New Jersey family and friends and other women poets. When she published to a broader audience, she did it anonymously or under a pseudonym.³ Boudinot and women like her⁴ were imaginative and compelling voices within a colonial and later a national culture; they contributed formatively to American literature, history, education, and religion by finding multiple ways to ignore or circumvent the restrictions and categories imposed on them by critics who defined them as merely sentimental writers or immodest "scribblers." Thanks to rigorous feminist scholarship, our knowledge of women's writings from the seventeenth to the twentieth century in this country is at present far more comprehensive than it was only a few decades ago. We can now read the works of numerous American women who wrote diaries, letters, personal narratives, meditations, poems, essays, novels, and dramas, which in some cases were widely published and in others circulated among trusted acquaintances. Available today after centuries of suppression and silence, there are remarkable archives, collections, anthologies, and newly reissued texts of some of the best of these writings.⁵

In examining the connections between feminism and literature, it is appropriate here to question further why the words, thoughts, and influences of women all the way from seventeenth-century Anne Bradstreet to late-nineteenth-century Kate Chopin⁶ were either thoroughly marginalized or all but lost for the greater part of the twentieth century in American academies and literary enclaves. Twentieth-century scholars and educators certainly no longer upheld Aristotle's idea of women as a "deformity of nature" or Tertullian's view of women as "a temple built over a sewer" (qtd. by Gilbert 5-6); yet attention to women's writings—either as imaginative or critical works—was almost entirely outside the standard course work or recommended graduate reading lists. One of the reasons for this neglect, as Jane Tompkins' studies on the making of American literary history have shown, occurred within the "male-dominated scholarly tradition" of university classrooms and publishing establishments that rigorously controlled "both the canon of American literature" and the "critical perspective that interpreted the canon" (84). And unfortunately this legacy, passed from generation to generation,

presumed that the writings of women generally lacked depth, originality, breadth, and universality.

These critical propensities emanating from the nation's ivy-league institutions minimized the work of women while aggrandizing the work of men. These biases constituted a patrimony, articulated and perpetuated by a long line of literary critics such as Perry Miller, F.O. Matthiessen, Harry Levin, Richard Chase, R.W. B. Lewis, Yvor Winters, Henry Nash Smith, Leslie Fiedler, and Alfred Kazin. The sexist proclivities and, perhaps even more significantly, the religious antagonisms of many of these admittedly brilliant and charismatic

*Women like Boudinot
contributed formatively to
American literature, history,
education, and religion.*

educators curtailed their interest in investigating the influences of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American women writers—not only as authors of significant histories, memoirs, biographies, essays, abolitionist treatises, and personal narratives but also as creators of impressive novels, poetry, short stories, and dramas. Many of these women writers, as Anita Baym demonstrates in her *American Women Writers and the Work of History 1790-1860*, worked within a strong moral, ethical, or religious framework as they addressed and represented the concerns of what they perceived as the ideal Christian republic and the ideal "Christian republican woman" (239). Intelligent and passionate, they wrote from a desire to express beauty and truth, and to use their language and arts to serve the family, the nation, and God. And what is more, notes Baym, these women dynamically, persuasively affected society with their visions of the world and women's key roles at its moral center:

According to the divine narrative shaping the discourse of [nineteenth-century women's] writings, the progress of history meant an extension of the spiritual power introduced by Christ into the world until finally the empires of brute force would be entirely transformed into peaceable kingdoms. . . . As the dominion of physical force contracted, so would the reign of men[;] and women. . . would

increasingly enter history decisively and directly.
(214)

In the twentieth-century academic constructions of an American literary history and the scholarly formulations of an American literary canon, the voices, values, and world-views of nineteenth-century, middle-class, mostly Anglo-Protestant, New England women (let alone women of color) were not particularly attractive to liberal twentieth-century males attempting to define distinguishing characteristics of American literary genius. These scholars' preoccupations with establishing compelling literary themes (the American Adam; subduing a virgin land; the westward moving young man; the machine in the garden; the rugged individualist; conquering the continent) prevented them from seeing American literature as much more textured and nuanced, more multi-vocal and multi-cultural, more inclusive of women's as well as men's experience than their privileging of male viewpoints permitted.⁷

Today we can see pointed irony in the fact that many women's voices (for example, Catherine Maria Sedwick, Susan Warner, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Harriet Ann Jacobs, Lydia Sigourney, Emma Willard, Sarah Orne Jewett) in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were not only intelligent, vigorous, and morally charged; they were also intellectually complex, creative, and resourceful; and some in their time were far more influential with their observations and critiques of American society than those delivered by writers such as Hawthorne and Melville, who only many years after their deaths came to be highly revered by twentieth-century scholars. Yet for much of our century, critics wrote off nineteenth-century women's works, of fiction and poetry particularly, as overly-emotional, melodramatic, or stylistically excessive, a reflection of sentimental or gothic traits not literary or great.

Today when we read passages stylistically excessive, gothic, or melodramatic—in the works of Charles Brockden Brown, Washington Irving, James Fennimore Cooper, Edgar Allan Poe, and yes, in Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, we are reminded that these writers are not the less great, but that literary judgments, supposedly representing some universal or objective standard, have often not been applied with an even hand to men

and women writers. And we wonder at the opinion of a writer like Nathaniel Hawthorne, who during his lifetime grumbled repeatedly about women authors. "Ink-stained Amazons," he called them, in an essay he wrote about Anne Hutchinson. He asserted that women's writings and "merits should be judged by a stricter...eye" because in showing "their naked mind to the gaze of the world" women are obliged to "justify themselves for an irregularity which men do not commit" (2272-73). When Hawthorne was annoyed that his writings were not selling as he wished, he pouted, "America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash" (qtd. in Pattee, 110). About Julia Ward Howe, Hawthorne complained: "Those are admirable poems of Mrs. Howe's, but the devil must be in a woman to publish them. . . . What a strange propensity it is in these scribbling women to make a show of their hearts, as well as their heads. . . for anybody to pry into that chooses! What does her husband think of it?" Following a trip to England, when both Hawthorne and his wife had kept extensive journals, he admitted in a letter to an editor, "Mrs. Hawthorne altogether excels me as a writer of travels. Her descriptions are the most perfect pictures that ever were put on paper; it is a pity they cannot be published; but . . . I would not like to see her name on your list of female authors" (qtd. in Solomon 11-12).⁸

Additional critical ironies appear through the first half of the twentieth century as Henry James, Sherwood Anderson, Jack London, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, William Faulkner, and other male authors were being lionized and promoted by publishers, professors, and purveyors of American literature. As critics were praising these male writers (and overlooking such things as T.S. Eliot's evident anti-Semitism, Ezra Pound's bizarre fascism, Hemingway's blatant chauvinism) novelists such as Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Ellen Glasgow, and Zora Neale Hurston faced rapidly shrinking reputations and neglect. Even as Sara Teasdale, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Elinor Wylie, and Marianne Moore were writing witty, searching, idiosyncratic, and innovative poetry, critic John Crowe Ransom in his essay "The Poet A Women"

(1936) was claiming that, unfortunately, the difference between male and female writers is that “a woman lives for love . . . [and] she is indifferent to intellectuality” (qtd. in Showalter 109). Theodore Roethke, referring to the difficulties twentieth-century female poets faced in being taken seriously, offered a catalogue of the “charges most frequently leveled against poetry by women: . . . lack of range—in subject matter and emotional tone, . . . lack of a sense of humor, . . . lyric or religious posturing, . . . lamenting the lot of woman, caterwauling, writing the same poem about fifty times, and so on” (133-34). However, even when a woman did prove capable of significant creativity and genius, she faced attitudes of the kind expressed not at all subtly by Hemingway (a writer much dependent on literary friends and helpful women) in his memoir, *A Moveable Feast*: “There is not much future in men being friends with great women. . . and there is usually even less future with truly ambitious women writers” (qtd. in Showalter 108).

Emory Elliott, editor of *The Columbia Literary History of the United States*, has observed that “a nation’s official history is ultimately no more than a story about which there is widespread agreement” (xvii). His remark is no dismissal of the importance of history but rather an acknowledgment that how history, in this case literary history, is formulated—who interprets the story, who is empowered to speak, who determines and registers the agreement—can and does change. In the last several decades and in progressive and identifiable stages, literary feminists have been among those to significantly question and alter the story of America’s literary history. They have revisited, corrected, and extended it. They have dislodged large obstacles in the way of understanding the full scope and significance of American women’s literary achievements. In some respects, it can be said that what the civil rights movement did to scrutinize and challenge the nation’s systemic racial inequities, literary feminism did to challenge widespread suppression, obstruction, neglect, and marginalizing of women writers.

In the initial stages, during the 1960s and early 1970s, feminist scholars such as Mary Ellman, Mary Anne Ferguson, Elaine Showalter, Barbara Solomon, Anita Baym, and Annette Kolodny examined the ways in which influential male-authored

texts over the centuries had portrayed women—, and how these literary perceptions and patterns operated as powerful, oft-evoked and echoed traditions in shaping and defining society’s views on the nature, role, place, and treatment of woman. Employing what came to be known as an “images of women” approach to literature, these feminist scholars analyzed hundreds of years of male authors’ poetic and fictional conventions in representing females.

As literary feminists mapped this terrain, they found that representations of women fell generally into several categories—those that fantasized the

*What civil rights did to
challenge racial inequities,
literary feminism did to
challenge the marginalizing
of women writers.*

character of woman (for example, as angel, muse, saint, goddess, sex object); those that demonized woman (for example, as wanton, shrew, bitch, temptress, witch, destroyer); or those that minimized woman (for example, as crone, spinster, hag, little woman). Summarizing the results of these studies, feminist historian Naomi Schor asserts that many of the “portrayals of female protagonists that had long claimed to be realistic were revealed. . . to be largely stereotypical projections of the patriarchal psyche.” Such images, reified over hundreds of years, became accepted, normalized and “legitimated by the unequal distribution of power between men and women in society at large” and by the lack of women’s texts offering correction, balance, or alternatives to the representations (Schor 265).

With these claims that men’s projections and feelings about women are not authoritative records of who women *really* are, literary feminists moved into a second stage of studies. Analyzing what they saw as the significant literary, social, and psychological implications of sexist stereotypes, they articulated serious concerns that these skewed images of women, occurring repeatedly and insistently in literature, become images internalized by

women as behaviors expected of them and images internalized by men as behaviors to be expected of women. Literary works, argued these feminists, are immensely potent vehicles for social and ideological content. And for this reason literary texts, they said, must be addressed and challenged when they perpetuate or reinforce long-held, systemic attitudes and patterns that misrepresent women's minds and bodies, intelligence and strengths, abilities and interests. As a consequence, Kate Millett, for example, in *Sexual Politics* (1970) documented the extensive misogyny in works by American writers such as Norman Mailer and Henry Miller as well as British writers such as D.H. Lawrence and Jean Genet. She maintained that their elaborate descriptions of sexual activity as physical and psychological domination were literary images that bolstered and encouraged the subjugation of women.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, feminists critics were concertedly challenging the extent to which women writers were absent from the well-known college texts and anthologies that claimed to fully represent the American literary scene. Using the published works of male scholars, both past and present, feminists exposed numerous derisory generalizations about women writers, in effect, documenting what Toni Morrison calls the "willed scholarly indifference" of a "centuries-long. . . blindness to feminist discourse and the way in which women and women's issues [have been] read (or unread)" (14). Thus, though women as subjects or objects might be frequently portrayed in the so-called canon of American literature, women writers were nearly invisible. The fact remained that the majority of texts designated "the classics" of American literature described a chiefly male experience and viewpoint as if the works and imaginations and critical views of women writers were not an on-going part of the nation's cultural, literary, and aesthetic development. In addition, as Anita Baym has shown, the genres that male writers developed or promoted became the culturally privileged ones: the frontier and Indian tale (Cooper), the travel adventure (Irving, Melville, Twain), the sea novel (Melville, London, Crane), the nature essay (Thoreau, Emerson), the philosophical essay (Emerson), the male coming-of-age narrative (Cooper, Twain, Crane, Sherwood Anderson). Activities such as life

on a whaling ship, raft adventures on the Mississippi, men gathering to hunt, to fight Indians, to search for gold, to expand empires, to watch bull fights—these activities were elevated as "the real symbols of human community. . . and continuity" (qtd. in Barrett 2) rather than activities associated with women's lives.

Today we can see clearly the value and extent of literary feminist efforts in rediscovering women's writings and in bringing them to visibility in critical discussions, classrooms, libraries, and bookstores. By reprinting important works of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century American women,⁹ feminist presses have resurrected and affirmed forceful and original voices. Likewise the expanded anthologies and collections available now from almost every major textbook publisher confirm that (women's previous absences in the male-constructed traditional literary canon notwithstanding) women writers were active and influential in the evolution of American fiction and poetry as well as genres such as biography; memoir; local, regional and national histories; personal essay; textbooks; religious tracts; and children's literature. Accordingly, feminists deserve credit for their efforts in the restoration, for example, of women novelists and poets, and authors in the abolitionist and transcendentalist movements in the previous century (writers such as Lydia Maria Child, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Susan Warner, Julia Ward Howe, Harriet Jacobs, Margaret Fuller, Kate Chopin, Sarah Orne Jewett, Charlotte Perkins Gilman) to stand beside their contemporaries—Hawthorne, Emerson, Douglas, Melville, Thoreau, Howells, Twain, James—who had paradoxically admired their imaginations yet undervalued or in some cases even scorned their work because they were women.

It is likewise encouraging to observe other positive, collateral effects of literary feminism. By establishing the undeniable presence of a strong, creative, women's tradition in American literature, feminism has had extensive growth at both scholarly and grass roots levels. It has dramatically influenced male as well as female writers, critics, reviewers, and publishers. It has contributed to the opening of doors to the works of men as well as women in other groups traditionally ignored, under-represented, or misrepresented in the American lit-

erary landscape—groups such as African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Native-Americans, and Hispanics. By enlarging the contours of America's literary heritage, feminism has expanded the range of texts available to readers not only in the United States but around the world where the English language and American studies are taught. Several years ago when teaching a course in American Literature at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu, Nepal, I was asked to include Asian-American and other minority texts, especially by women. Recently at my home university, I taught a course in Native-American literature from 1750 to the present; one of the preliminary challenges in creating that syllabus was to select from the wide range of writers (male and female authors of fiction, poetry, autobiography, essay, and drama) now available and in print, many edited by feminist critics and published by feminist presses. Thus, literary feminists' multiple emphases on scholarship and literary criticism, on recovering old texts and celebrating new ones, and on publishing women's creative as well as critical writings have not remained elitist, ivory tower projects, but have percolated through our contemporary global society in remarkable ways.

Literary feminism in its various manifestations has had additional consequences. At our university, students take courses in post-colonial and third-world literature; the authors they study—African, Latin American, Caribbean, Asian—speak with voices powerfully shaped by their histories of oppression. Often there is pain, confusion, conflict, and anger palpable in this literature; there is also hope, yearnings for justice, recognition, and peace; and there are riveting expressions of beauty, poetry, and genius. These novels, stories, plays, poems, and essays are political as well as aesthetic, ideological as well as eloquent. Their authors struggle with issues of oppression and recognition not unlike those that feminist critics address. Post-colonial scholar and feminist Lois Tyson has in fact detailed the importance of understanding the complexity of literature that bears witness to the "double oppression suffered by post-colonial women [who are] the victims of both colonialist ideology, which devalues them because of their race, and patriarchal ideology, which devalues them because of their gender"(370).

Several years ago, as I was doing research on modern Chinese literature, I came upon interesting evidences of the roles that Christian missionaries had played in altering the lives of Chinese females oppressed by the oldest, most highly developed, male-dominated kinship systems in history. Nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century American missionaries (many of them women who found their gender less a constraint and their range of influence less limited on the mission field) observed that Chinese women seemed to be living like frogs in a well, and that "until womankind be lifted up, China must needs be heavily weighted in

*By reprinting works of
American women, feminist
presses have affirmed
forceful and original voices.*

her struggle for progress" (Lewis 4).

Missionaries who went to China patiently subverted the oppressive domestic and social traditions they confronted there. Unlike their male counterparts, women missionaries were able to enter the compounds where Chinese women lived and worked and to wage a quiet war on customs that for centuries had subjugated them—arranged marriage, polygamy, concubinage, bound feet, female slavery, widow suicide, child brides. Their strategic weapons in overcoming these injustices were education and literacy for women. Thus, missionaries opened the first Chinese girls' schools, the first co-educational elementary schools, the first women's colleges, and then the first co-educational colleges, offering Chinese women a curriculum preparing them for careers in teaching and medicine. Women missionaries modeled new social patterns and gender roles to the Chinese girls and women they taught and befriended. In their attempts to promote the values of human dignity and freedom from sexual exploitation, Christian missionaries served as a vital force, says Chinese novelist and historian Han Suyin, that steadily "awakened our social conscience, armed us with ideals, [and] dragged our scholars from their . . . torpor" (255). A number of the early twentieth-century Chinese women fiction

writers benefitted from attending schools developed as a result of Christian missionary efforts. Some of the most courageous writers, such as Ding Ling and Xioa Hong, in choosing literary paths which few females in China's history had taken before them, created vivid portraits of women suffering from and resisting subjugation, exploring the various dimensions of a female consciousness which missionaries had worked to uncover, nurture, and enlarge. Over the course of this century, Western feminists have kept the works of these women alive in translation, particularly in the wake of China's so-called cultural revolution, when many of these writings were destroyed or banned. Today, in a China more open to its own past history, these women writers are being rediscovered and acknowledged as a significant element in China's literary history.

Finally, in my own journey of pondering, questioning, searching, and discovering (and in the journeys I see many of my students making), I am thankful to literary feminists for uncovering important elements and issues in the progress and history of literature. Sensitivities to feminist concerns, disciplined by Christian insight and discretion, can also offer useful ways to understand and engage with ethnic, multi-cultural, and international literature. Most notably, it can open our eyes to the ways that literature is not neutral or apolitical or merely aesthetic but creates what Nicholas Wolterstorff calls "the world of the work" in which issues of justice and right, freedom and faith, morality and integrity are represented by what is included in the text but also by what is absent, ignored, or neglected. Thus our awareness of how literary works and worlds represent (or fail to represent) the human family, female as well as male, needs to be a vital, informed, and inextricable part of our reading.

END NOTES

1. In a vein similar to Winthrop's criticism in the reprimand that Rev. Thomas Parker, a colonial minister, gave in a public letter to his sister in England upon her publishing a book in 1650: "Your printing of a book, beyond the custom of your sex, doth rankly smell" (qtd in Gilbert, 52).
2. John Smith, William Bradford, John Winthrop, Jonathan Edwards, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, William Cullen Bryant, Henry Wadsworth
- Longfellow, Walt Whitman, and with the blossoming of American fiction, Washington Irving, James Fennimore Cooper, Edgar Allen Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Mark Twain—although this list is not complete, it serves to make my point.
3. See works of Stockton collected in *Only for the Eye of a Friend: The Poetry of Annis Boudinot Stockton*, ed. Carla Mulford (University Press of Virginia, 1995).
4. Other collections available are: Cheryl Walker, *American Poets of the Nineteenth Century: An Anthology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Pattie Cowell, ed., *Women Poets in Pre-Revolutionary America 1650-1775* (1981); Emily Stipes Watts, ed., *The Poetry of American Women from 1632 to 1945* (Austin: Austin University Press, 1977).
5. In addition to numerous re-issued and newly edited or re-edited novels, there is a wide range of American women's writings in collections such as the following: *Colonial American Travel Narratives*, ed. Wendy Martin (New York: Penguin, 1994); *Women's Indian Captivity Narratives*, ed. Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola (New York: Penguin, 1998); *The Oxford Book of Women's Writing in the United States*, eds. Linda Wagner-Martin and Cathy N. Davidson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); *Spiritual Narratives*, Schomberg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); *The (Other) American Traditions: Nineteenth-Century Women Writers*, ed. Joyce W. Warren (New Brunswick University Press, 1993); *American Women Regionalists, 1850-1910*, eds. Judith Fetterly and Marjorie Pryse (New York: Norton, 1991); *Women and Religion in America, Volume 2: The Colonial and Revolutionary Periods, A Documentary History*, eds. Rosemary Radford Reuther and Rosemary Skinner Keller (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983); *Women and Religion in America, Volume 1: The Nineteenth Century, A Documentary History* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981); *Women and Religion in American, Volume 3: A Documentary History, 1900-1986* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986); *Sisters of the Spirit: Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century*, ed. William L. Andrews (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); "Scribbling Women": *Short Stories by Nineteenth Century Women*, ed. Elaine Showalter (Rutgers University Press, 1997); *American Women Writers to 1800*, ed. Sharon M. Harris (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
6. Other such writers include Mary Rowlandson, Sarah Kemble Knight, Ann Cotton, Elizabeth Ashbridge, Phillis Wheatley, Judith Sargent Murray, Mercy Otis Warren, Hannah Webster Foster, Susanna Haswell Rowson, Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Sarah Margaret

- Fuller, Lydia Marie Child, Harriet Ann Jacobs, Harriet Wilson, Julia Foote, Harriet Beecher Stowe, to name a few.
7. For the most of the twentieth-century, prominent male scholars comfortably ignored or side-stepped the innovative, vital, and influential writings by American women who published in the nineteenth-century: Catherine Maria Sedgwick, Susan Warner, Lydia Maria Child, Sarah J. Hale, Augusta Evans, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Mercy Otis Warren, Lydia Sigourney, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Harriet Ann Jacobs, Harriet E. Wilson, Caroline Kirkland, Fanny Hale, Emma Willard, Marietta Holley, Rebecca Harding Davis, Constance Fenimore Woolson. Almost all of these women were well-known, significant household names in their time.
 8. In addition to Hawthorne, although not as overtly petulant, nineteenth-century editor Thomas Wentworth Higginson also revealed some significant limitations in assessing a woman's poetry; when given an opportunity to evaluate Emily Dickinson's poems, he thought them "odd, too delicate—not strong enough to publish."
 9. For example: Louise Mae Alcott, Kate Chopin, Edith Wharton, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Sarah Orne Jewett, Zora Neal Hurston, Rebecca Harding Davis, Edith Wharton, Edna St. Vincent Millay.
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Darkness: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage, 1993.
- Pattee, Fred Lewis. *The Feminine Fifties. American Literature before the Civil War*. New York: Appleton-Century, 1940.
- Roethke, Theodore. "The Poetry of Louise Bogan." *Selected Prose of Theodore Roethke*. Ed. Ralph Mills, Jr. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965.
- Rowlandson, Mary. *A True History of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson. Women's Indian Captivity Narratives*. Ed. Kathryn Zabelle Derounian-Stodola. New York: Penguin, 1998. 6-61.
- Schor, Naomi. "Feminist and Gender Studies." *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literatures*. Ed. Joseph Gibaldi. New York: MLA, 1992.
- Showalter, Elaine. *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1991.
- Solomon, Barbara., ed. *Rediscovering: American Short Stories by Women, 1800-1916*. Mentor Books, 1994.
- Tompkins, Jane. "Sentimental Power: *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and the Politics of Literary History." *The New Feminist Criticism*. Ed. Elaine Showalter. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985. 81-104.
- Tyson, Lois. *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1998.
- Winthrop, John. *Winthrop's Journal: "History of New England, 1630-1649."* Ed. James Kendal Hosmer. Vol. 2. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1946.

WORKS CITED

- Barrett, Eileen, ed. *American Women Writers: Diverse Voice in Prose Since 1845*. New York: St. Martin's, 1992.
- Baym, Anita. *American Women Writers and the Work of History 1790-1860*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995.
- Bradstreet, Ann. *The Complete Works of Ann Bradstreet*. Eds. Joseph R. McElrah, Jr. and Allen Robb. Boston: Twayne, 1981.
- Elliott, Emory, ed. "Introduction." *Columbia Literary History of the United States*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.
- Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar, eds. *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English*. New York: Norton, 1985.
- Han Suyin. *A Many Splendored Thing*. New York: Bantam Books, 1952.
- Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "Mrs. Hutchinson." *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Paul Lauter et. al. 3rd ed. Vol. 1. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998. 2272-77.
- Lewis, Ida Belle. *The Education of Girls in China*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1919.
- Millett, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. Garden City: New York: Doubleday, 1970.