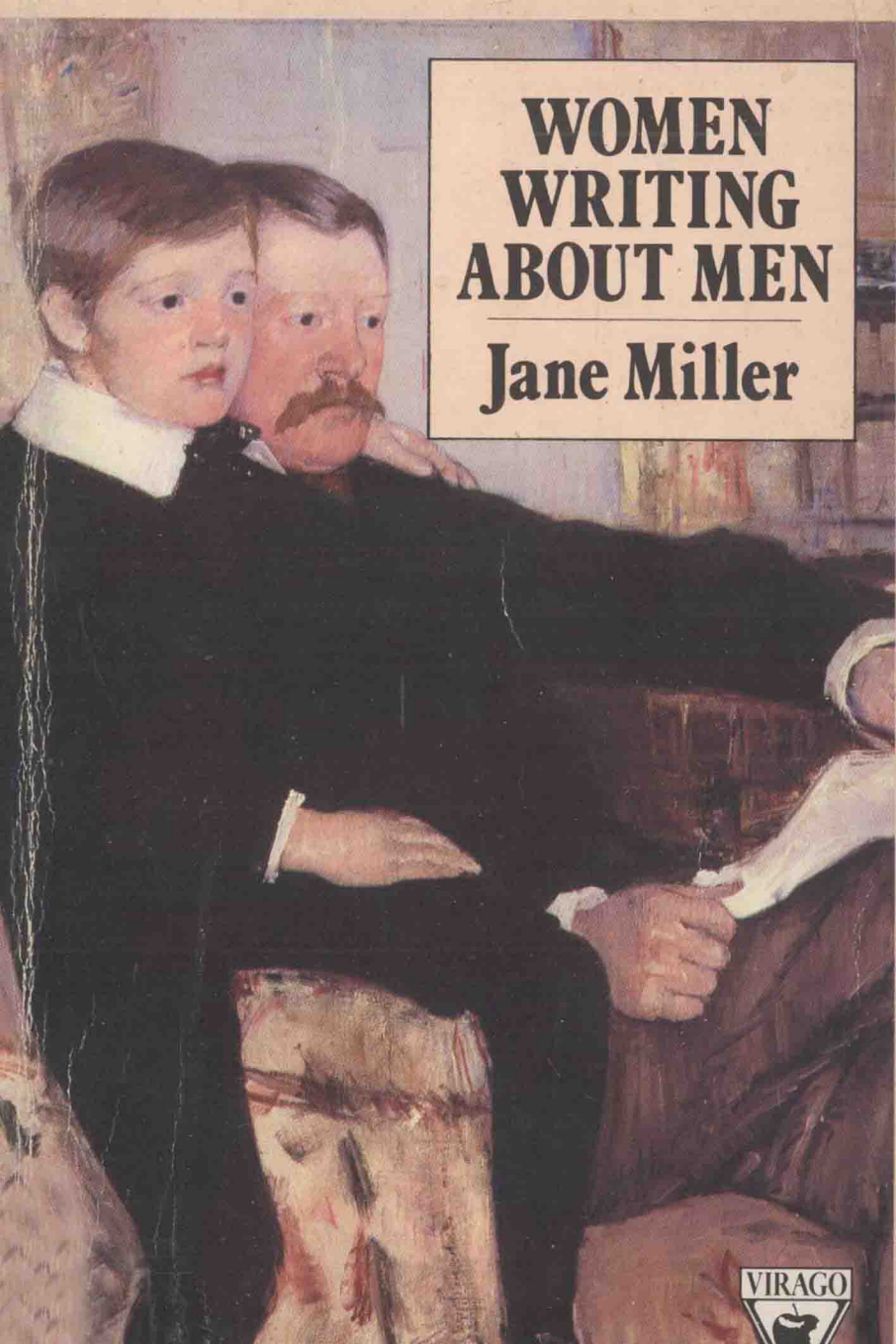
WOMEN
WRITING
ABOUT MEN
Jane Miller
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Women Writing About Men

Jane Miller

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In memory of Tony White

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Contents

Introduction

Women have been excluded by the vagaries of the communal 'we' which can seem to include them. If they lurk, as they do, within 'human beings' or even 'men', it is as men's daughters and wives and mothers and sisters, or even, deceptively, as people just like men, as good as men. It is the sharing – however unequally and ambiguously – of culture and language and values which has made a women's 'we' so hard to assert. Women who dare to do so, to claim particular experiences, dilemmas, qualities or vision as peculiar to, even common to, women, have needed to contend with their own objections as well as with men's. Labelled and tucked into men's defining inclusions of them, women are hard put to know where they begin and end. They will have learned their own wariness of arguments and generalisations mounted on the personal and the idiosyncratic. Yet a bypassing of their own inhibitions in this respect is enjoined on them by the character of their relation to men and to men's culture. They have had to return to their personal knowledge in order to explain what it is that they recognise in other women's lives and why that recognition is important. Recognition is the beginning of an understanding of women's relations with men and of the effect on women's identity of their participation in a male and dominantly heterosexual culture.

This is a book about novels by women and about the men in them. It is also a book about women reading and the sense they may come to make of other women's accounts of the world. Its focus is the novel as a form which women writers have used to question and challenge men's appropriation of women's experience. Its organisation and its themes follow and attempt to enact

my own history as a woman and as a reader through novels written by women from the early nineteenth century to the present day. I shall get closer to my starting point with an example from my own reading. It is one which characterises an aspect of my realisation that I was simultaneously included and excluded by men as a reader of literature. I first read T. S. Eliot's *Journey of the Magi* at school. Four lines of it have remained with me.

> At the end we preferred to travel all night,
> Sleeping in snatches,
> With the voices singing in our ears, saying
> That this was all folly.

I have thought of those voices of Eliot's 'singing in our ears' as men's voices, and as the kind of men's voices which women have learned to impersonate and to hear as uneasily duplicated and echoed by the sounds of their own. I also know myself to be excluded from the poem's 'we', even as I accept the invitation of the poem and of its narrator to understand his story as a human one, to which I have access. A central theme of this book will be that women readers are so used to confusions of that kind and to the androgyny they encourage and depend on that they may read women's writing in the same way and fail to see that women have necessarily written out of that very ambiguity.

Novels are stories, and stories are organised to avoid the response 'So what?' If they are not replete with beginnings and complications, with resolutions and endings and values and a time sequence, we know that we are being played with, even tested. A culture is its stories, and it is always significant that some people tell stories and other people listen to them. The challenge for women who have told stories and written novels has revolved around their right to assert as a story and as an adventure events, and the living of them, which the culture allows for and yet excludes from being representatively human. So long as the ending, the completion, of a woman's story is marriage to a man, a woman's adventure will not be a man's adventure. Its time scale will be different, for a woman's adventure will occupy only a small

strip of her life, when she is very young. It will test her and put her through her paces; but the proceedings, like the outcome, will be circumscribed by the conventions of the society she inhabits, which will figure in her adventure as protagonists bent above all on controlling what she can tell and how.

I shall want to suggest that most women's novels are engaged at some level in extricating their authors as well as their heroines from charges of abnormality. If marriage is the 'normal' ending to a woman's adventure and the necessary completion of a woman's existence, circumstances which deflect a woman from or deny her that outcome, deservedly or not, may be read as unfortunate if not perverse. That characterisation is too simple, of course, for writers from Maria Edgeworth onwards have found ways to divert that trajectory and even to propose alternative time scales and alternative endings. But they have often done so allusively, obliquely and with circumspection. If events leading to a marriage constitute the form of the novel about women, that form determines the heroine's future as well as the terms and the terrain of her scope for heroic or admirable behaviour. What a heroine can know of her future must be winnowed out of her experience to date, and that will throw her back to models of men, of marriage and of family life drawn from her childhood. The prospects of marriage to a man are prefigured by her childhood roles, and many of her adult relationships with men will carry aspects of those earlier relations – as a daughter or a sister of men, or from memories of a mother who was also, perhaps, a mother of sons – and may resemble them.

The men in women's novels are not just men, but men seen from a woman's perspective. That is an essential perspective – and it is often ignored or misunderstood – because it can supply us with an outsider's vision of a culture. My book will be a disappointment, I expect, for anyone hoping for a gallery neatly hung with the portraits women have painted of men. I have wanted to show that men are to be found in women's novels as they are to be found in women's heads and histories: equivocally. They are ourselves, our protectors, our representatives and our opponents.

For in controlling our needs and our natures and our vision they become deaf to our stories the more finely tuned we become to theirs. Theirs, but also ours, are 'the voices singing in our ears', and I have not wanted to expel them, beguiling and misleading though they have often been. They will be heard singing here, as readers and as relatives, as critics and as theorists, as novelists and as standard bearers of all that is true and excellent and withheld. They are also men as women have seen and known and articulated them within fictions which both match and collide with the fictions of men. No more than other women do those women who have written novels speak for all women. It may be, though, that women who read and write a good deal have heard men's voices more insistently than other women, and have had to improvise all the more ringingly and decisively the descants which might – for a time at least – drown them out.

The book has several somewhat wavering chronologies to it, but it does not go quite as the crow flies. If I begin with Jane Austen and end in the 1980s that is only part of the story. For I have wanted to set my own development as a reader alongside changes in women's novels over the last two hundred years. The interweaving of those two histories may well be thought to have landed me with some arbitrary choices of novels and even more arbitrary approaches to them.

I begin with questions. They are questions which, as a woman and as a reader, I have gradually come to see as essential, if tentative, starting points for an understanding of the relation of women writers and readers to the traditions of the novel and to critical discourse about novels. The questions which emerge from what I want to characterise as a learned androgyny are about that androgyny and about how women writers and readers have dealt with their sense of being impersonators, outsiders masquerading as insiders. I make analogies between that experience and bilingualism and immigration, in order to explore both the strengths of women's perspectives and the source and nature of particular fears in women writers. They are fears about writing,

about love, about ignorance and about morality. Women's dependence on men can isolate them from each other, and that isolation has bred distrust of their own judgement and authority.

Women who have moved, individually and collectively, towards what they would want to see as feminist understandings of sexual and social relations have needed to start then, as I have suggested, from what they know in their own lives. That personal knowledge is potentially political knowledge, though it may be pre-political in the sense of being untheorised and ungeneralised, embedded still in women's peculiar isolation. I have wanted, as I moved from readings of Jane Austen to readings of some contemporary novelists, to represent that shift as multi-dimensional for both readers and writers. There is, first, the shift from accommodations and angers produced by the narrow perspectives available to women of a particular class and place and time to analyses of sexual relations, as sites of oppression and conflict within social arrangements founded on class and race antagonisms. There is then the shift lived by individual women, and by individual women readers, away from doubleness, ambivalence, uneasiness about an identity defined by what it is not and always in some sort of relation to what it is not, towards more confident assertions. Another version of that shift is from the preoccupations of novelists like Jane Austen, the Brontës and George Eliot with the sexual inequities of family life to a concern with the sources and the implications of those inequities. There is, finally, a shift from an uncomfortable acceptance of the novel form as an apt mode of expression for a woman's vision to the beginnings of resistance to and a critique of narrative itself as embodying assumptions which are inimical to women's language and experience.

So, from a first chapter of questions, speculation and hypotheses issuing from what I have, uncandidly, called pre-political experience, I move to novels in which women have tackled the prospect of marriage to a man in terms of what a woman could know about men. Chapter 2 deals with Jane Austen's treatment of fathers – gentlemen and figures of authority in her novels – who present her heroines with ambiguous models of male worth and

ambiguous messages about the prospects of happiness in marriage and the relation of women to the class of their fathers and their husbands. I grew up without brothers and with a strong sense that I was not alone in looking, probably in vain, for a brother as the only possible mate. It is for that reason that I have discussed this theme in Chapter 3 in terms of the phantom or surrogate brother in the novels of the Brontës rather than through a novel like George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, where a real brother–sister relationship occupies the centre of the story. Women have not often written about the relation of a mother to her son, perhaps because that stands for the most painful clash between a culture's stories about a woman and her own stories about herself. In Chapter 4, I have looked at the way Rebecca West and George Eliot tackled the subject.

These chapters on fathers and brothers and sons could be said to present limiting cases, in the sense that all three themes are to be found in many other women's novels, and Jane Austen, the Brontës and George Eliot could easily be approached through alternative relationships between women and men. There were several reasons for beginning in this way. One is that authority, doubleness and creativity are central ideas of the work of, respectively, Jane Austen, the Brontës and George Eliot, and those ideas are partly carried by the presence in the novels of fathers and brothers and sons. Another reason is that these are all writers I have returned to at different stages of my life, when I have cast myself in my reading as a daughter, a sister, a wife or a mother.

By Chapter 5, which is about the discrepancy between men's heroes and women's heroes, I have become less guarded as a reader and less covert in my plans to develop a feminist theory of reading and of writing which is both political and necessarily and wilfully eclectic. As I return to some of the same authors and look at some new ones, marriage has by now dissolved as a consummation with equivalent meanings for men and for women, and romance and pornography come to be seen as gendered fantasies about power. In Chapter 6, I return to the novel as a form, to narrative and to Dorothy Richardson's novel about the possi-

bilities of a new voice and a new logic to match the bisexuality of women's experience. In Chapter 7, I follow five twentieth-century novelists and chart the development from a feminist anger cited still within the injustices of family life to a politics which sees sexual relations on a continuum with other forms of mutilating oppression. In the last chapter I take up this theme in relation to several American writers who are Black or working-class or, as in the case of Maxine Hong Kingston, members of a racial minority. They are writers who are able to make essential links between class and race oppression and the oppression of women, and they allow me to try for a tentative synthesis of recent feminist theorising about women's relations with men.

A last autobiographical note. As a teacher, my concern during the last ten years or so has been with the experiences of bilingual children in school and with the place of literature in the curriculum. Those might well be thought to be 'educational issues' of quite a specialised kind. Yet this book has grown out of those concerns and out of the questions they pose. The questions are about culture, about language and about how we have all learned to read literature. Children are not invited to become readers by stories which neglect their lives and their knowledge. Emerson must have meant something like that when he wrote about his reading of history: 'The fact narrated must correspond to something in me to be credible or intelligible.'[1] We do not find ourselves in books, but we do expect to be able to make our way in them as experienced storytellers of our own lives. What kinds of effort of thinking and feeling are we requiring of children when we ask them to read? I have come to feel implicated in that question, and not just as a teacher. For women's relation to culture, to reading, and indeed to education, poses a similar question.

Men have invited us into their stories, their literature and into their ways of reading it. Many of us have accepted the invitation. Yet once in, gratitude can turn to dismay. For the invitation has often turned out to be a demonstration of our exclusion from stories and from understandings of them. Because some women

have done it all *as if* they were men, even *as well as* men, the problem has been shelved. Yet for many of us there could be the unnerving and even debilitating discovery of ourselves as outsiders, as immigrants or dependants, or, at best, as a kind of bargain or 'free gift'. I shall want to argue, however, that a recognition of that exclusion has not been disabling. Far from it. Seeing it for what it is has felt for some of us like a miraculous rescue, performed in the nick of time.

That rescue was performed for me about fifteen years ago when I first read Dorothy Richardson, having come across one volume of her work on the shelf marked 'Travel' in an extremely small library in Scotland. *Pilgrimage* has been very important to me. Never before had I been so interested by anything I had read. Yet I was also often maddened by it and by its author, beadily aware that she could sometimes be boring and 'bad'. I found that I needed to ponder the interest I had in her and to consider why I could read this utterly divided writer with such utterly divided feelings about her. Knowing her, as by now I feel I do, I would expect her rather tetchily to reprove me for the simple-minded way in which I learned to be a feminist from reading her novels. For she was never simple-minded or single-minded or ready to deliver herself of easy solutions. She explored and she registered dividedness; and from her I learned to recognise my own dividedness and to discover it in other writers. For dividedness is one of the things women have in common; that and not being men. Moreover, they have felt that dividedness and expressed it in terms of their relation to men. Poets and novelists have said it better than I can. Angela Carter, for instance, in that conjuring trick of a novel, *The Passion of New Eve*, makes her hero-turned-heroine say it like this:

> This intensive study of feminine manners, as well as my everyday work about the homestead, kept me in a state of permanent exhaustion. I was tense and preoccupied; although I was a woman, I was now also passing for a woman, but then, many women born spend their whole lives in just such imitations.[2]

Adrienne Rich gives another version of that dividedness, more plaintively perhaps, but also in a way which many women are bound to recognise:

> The phantom of the man-who-would-understand,
> the lost brother, the twin –
>
> for him did we leave our mothers,
> deny our sisters, over and over?[3]

Virginia Woolf knew all too well that she was wrong when she went to the British Museum to look up everything that men had written about women and then found that

> Women do not write books about men – a fact that I could not help welcoming with relief, for if I had first to read all that men have written about women, then all that women have written about men, the aloe that flowers once in a hundred years would flower twice before I could set pen to paper.[4]

She was wrong, as she knew, because women have always written about men, but they have needed to be extremely circumspect about doing so. To read as a woman is to confront that circumspection as a mode of being and a kind of language, which can be powerfully subversive and potentially revolutionary.

In considering how women have written about men I have needed to allude, often too glancingly, to debates within the women's movement and, more particularly, within feminist discussion of literary criticism and literary theory. In some cases the notes at the end of the book will give, as well as sources, more detail about these arguments. The notes represent at least, as does the bibliography, the background reading which has been essential to me and which may be useful to readers.