

Where is the female Tolstoy?

Where is the female Tolstoy? Is a question that has plagued women's writing for decades. Usually this question is asked with the sneer of derision, as men and the establishment seek to devalue the contribution of women's writing. The female Tolstoy is as elusive a creature as the African Tolstoy. Taken from this angle the question is used to reinforce male intellectual superiority and to make genius a quality exclusive to men.

Ask the question again; where is the female Tolstoy? And by that I mean why among all the many brilliant women writers have none gained the space in the literary cannon anywhere equal to their male contemporaries?

This is a difficult question to answer. For female novelists of the 19th century who have been admitted to the literary cannon, George Eliot, Charlotte Bronte, and perhaps most interestingly of all Jane Austen, society and prejudice hung heavy on them and on their literary activities. George Eliot and Charlotte Bronte were initially published under male pseudonyms. Jane Austen was merely published as 'a lady'. Opportunities to publish and the possible damage to reputation forced such compromises from women writers. Yet these are writers of genius whose work was initially accepted as the work of men, giving a lie to the notion that genius is a particular trait of those endowed with an XY chromosome pair. Of the three Jane Austen is perhaps the most interesting in terms of her legacy in the 21st century.

In her essay *A room of one's own*. Virginia Woolf describes Jane Austen as a writer who wrote "without hate, without bitterness, without fear, without protest, without preaching." (68) She wrote according to Woolf the way Shakespeare wrote, so fully consumed by the work that they efface all trace of themselves. The great tragedy of Jane Austen is that today she has been dragged unwillingly out from behind her novels, which she so carefully wrote herself out of. Jane Austen has become a cottage industry with films, seminars, spin offs and

the romanticising of Regency England. She, like Shakespeare before her, has become a national icon in Britain, and most of the English-speaking world. The downside of this is the fact that the work itself loses its meaning and its impact. *Pride and Prejudice* is not a pretty Regency romance, in fact it is as far from the romantic tradition as you could hope to get. *Pride and Prejudice* is a satirical and scathing novel about the importance of marrying money. It is about the calculations, and jockeying for position that women had to engage in to succeed in the marriage market. Mr Darcy is neither described, nor given much character development. He doesn't need it! His place in the story is to be a desirable object to be fought over by the women. To reduce Jane Austen to a romance writer, like a genteel precursor to Mills and Boon novels, is to rob her of her dignity and her genius as a writer.

If trivialising the work of women is one way to silence their claims to genius, another is to declare them mad. This is the fate that has unfortunately befallen Virginia Woolf. Yes, it is an undisputable fact that Virginia Woolf suffered from a reoccurring mental illness, which ultimately claimed her life. Virginia Woolf also wrote some of the most brilliant modernist fiction in the 20th century, including *Mrs Dalloway*, *Orlando*, and my personal favourite *Flush*, a biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's spaniel. Here was a woman who wrote without fear or favour, she had the freedom to write what she wanted, without having to compromise it for the dictates of market forces. And yet say the name Virginia Woolf and the first reaction by many, no doubt influenced by the film *The Hours*, is that she was 'mad'. To be declared mad is to be disenfranchised, a thing Virginia knew well. The wealth of correspondence and diaries left by Woolf has become for many, more important than her works of fiction. Just as Jane Austen has lost her genius to the heritage and tourism industry, so Virginia Woolf has lost hers to the medical fraternity.

Posthumous reduction of women's writing is one thing that has prevented the birth of a female Tolstoy, but in this so called enlightened modern age, what now prevents women from

assuming this mantle? Many traditional, as well as some new factors discriminate against women's writing in the 21st century.

Many women, even in the privileged West still do not have a room of their own, and certainly not a private income to support it. Economic necessity drives women into the labour market, where unless they are highly skilled and can afford work part time, end up in jobs, which allow little time or energy for writing. Society still expects that women will enter a relationship and bear children, and to place writing, or indeed any career, ahead of these traditional roles can be seen as selfish. A woman who is a wife and mother will find that the room of her own is unattainable; or at least unattainable without a large serving of guilt, which will ultimately mar her writing.

The reduction of women's writing to autobiography is a new factor, which has discriminated against women's writing in recent decades. Women's writing has for the main part been marginal. Women are heavily represented in children's fiction, romance fiction, and chick-lit, all genres considered beneath the attention of male writers. Just as teaching and nursing have become the domain of women professionals, while men aspire to higher paid and more prestigious roles as academics and doctors. When women's writing does not constrain itself with the genre fiction assigned to it, but aspires to write literary fiction, women find that the goal posts are constantly being moved. For many women, attempting to write 'literary fiction' usually involves the use of the self as subject, especially if the writer is young and inexperienced. Young writers are often advised to write about what they know, to write from experience. What at first glance sounds like an innocuous and reasonable statement, is too often taken literally by the aspiring woman writer, and she proceeds to write about her own life. The reduction of women's creative power to the recreation of the world in which, they live is a more sure constraint on women's genius than all the posthumous tinkering. If women

cancel their own writing to the level of experience then no matter how well written their work is it will never have the universal transcendence that marks a true work of art.

This reduction to autobiography is possibly most obviously felt in the writing of Jeanette Winterson, whose first novel *Oranges are not the only fruit* has been read as autobiography by naive readers for the past twenty odd years. Winterson herself is adamant that her work is not autobiographical, and nor should it be read as such. She makes it very clear that like all writers she uses the experiences of her life to create her work, but that this scavenging of one's own past for material does not constitute biography. When Charles Dickens uses early life experiences to write *David Copperfield* the reader does not automatically assume that the author and character are one and the same. Men are gifted with the resource of imagination and women, through the insistence on autobiography are denied it.

Finally the different content of men and women's writing also works against the female Tolstoy. Male writers dominate the canon of world literature, thus the reasoning here would argue, what men have to say is more important. Men write about grand world changing events, they write about topics that will be of interest to men. Which, at this time usually means world politics, crime and war, all told in a rational and objective manner. Women write about love, especially romantic love, and human relationships. They write in an emotional and subjective manner. In theory, women would have to write like men to be valued in the same way as a man. In theory, all a woman has to do is write about what men feel is important in a rational and objective manner and she will be their equal. This theory unfortunately does not hold up to fact. Just as careers become devalued in the eyes of men when women enter them in large numbers, so too do intellectual positions. Prior to the late 18th century, emotion and fine sensibilities were the dominion of men. Women were regarded to have an inferior emotional life, one that centred mainly on the bearing of children. Women were lusty, beautiful, silly creatures, who had to be protected from themselves like children.

With the advent of the enlightenment and the rise of science, emotion and sentiment were cast off as manly virtues in favour of reason and objectivity. Women were, and are, now silly, emotional beings who cannot view the world in a rational manner. Women thus play catch up with the men, who just as we grasp their coat tails they sip it off and into a new one.

What is needed is not a female Tolstoy, but rather a valuing of women's writing and female experience in its own right. A woman may not be able to write War and Peace, but nor would she want to. She could perhaps write Anna Karenina, though. However, a woman's Anna may not slip under the wheels.

Natalie Muller

References

A room of ones own Virginia Woolf Penguin classics 2000

First published *Narrator Magazine: Blue Mountains*, Winter 2011.