

Jeanne Moskal and Shannon R. Wooden, eds. 2005: *Teaching British Women Writers 1750-1900*. New York: Peter Lang. xii+235 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8204-6927-0

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Over the last thirty years the teaching of literature at university level has changed dramatically. One of the issues that contributed to this change is the ongoing revision of the literary canon and the inclusion of women writers in it. Some of the books that most aided the reevaluation of British women writers were those by Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1978) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). These feminist essays promoted the reassessment of forgotten texts by female writers for their eventual incorporation into mainstream literature, and they were inscribed in the feminist-antifeminist debate prevalent in society and in the academy in the last quarter of the twentieth century. This debate was nurtured by other assessments on feminist literary theory such as Toril Moi's *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (1985). In Moi's study the feminist perspective in the analysis of literary texts is evaluated through the different practices carried out in the twentieth century from Virginia Woolf onwards, both in the Anglo-American and French schools. The evolution and development of this critical perspective can be proved by the many anthologies, guides, dictionaries and encyclopaedias published in the last few decades of the twentieth century, which contributed to the real use of neglected texts by women writers in teaching. Examples of these could be *First Feminists. British Women Writers 1578-1799* (Ferguson 1985), *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (Gilbert and Gubar 1996), *The Oxford Guide to British Women Writers* (Shattock 1993), *The Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English* (Sage 1999), *A Dictionary of British and American Women Writers 1660-1800* (Todd 1987) and *An Encyclopaedia of British Women Writers* (Schlueter and Schlueter 1988). There are also preeminent dissenting voices in this debate, such as that of Harold Bloom, whose *The Western Canon* (1994) supports a writers' catalogue in which women writers as a whole have little or no place. However, as Joanna Russ has shown in *How to Suppress Women's Writing* (1989), this fact was the consequence of the unfair suppression of women in literature and public life.

This is still an ongoing debate in which many scholars are attempting to revise the history of literature and make it more comprehensible and inclusive, using literary parameters in order to analyse it and to incorporate a gender component, i.e. the literary history of women. Likewise, the goals and curriculum of English studies are also an arena for debate both in Spain (AEDEAN webpage) and abroad (Culler 2003). In the past twenty years many studies have been published on the history of English literature from a feminist perspective, but only a minimal percentage of them focus on the actual teaching of literature by women (Ruwe 2001, Overton 1991). They are almost all centred in American universities (Resources for Teaching Women Writers, Brown), the

perspectives of both students and teachers are not always included (Behrendt and Linkin 1997), and those which are deal only with certain periods of English literature (Woods and Hannay 2001). New research has been funded by the European Union and European universities in general so that a Europe-wide assessment on the teaching of women writers can be carried out (International; Corvey; Women Romantic–Era Writers), although as of yet it is not fully comprehensive.

The present collection of evaluative essays on the actual practice of teaching British eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women writers is highly illuminating in this respect. The scope of the publication covers teaching in different contexts in both British and American universities, offering a wide inventory of self-assessments of professors' and students' teaching and learning activities. The book is divided into two parts, comprising twenty articles and an introduction. Under the heading 'Reading to Teach: Classroom Practices and Pedagogies', the first section is devoted to the teaching of literature in various university conditions. The second, entitled 'Teaching to Read: Making Students of Scholars (and Vice Versa)', deals with learning experiences on the part of both teachers and students. The book thus offers a perspective of the whole educational process. On the one hand, it includes not only tutors as agents of teaching, but also as learners, in that they have to explore new fields of study in the different phases of their careers. On the other, students are included both as recipients of knowledge and as authors, insofar as they offer invaluable input to the assessment of the inextricable, bi-univocal teaching-learning process, in which they too can be active agents in research.

In the Introduction, Jeanne Moskal makes clear the point of view of the editors with regard both to the literary canon and to the teaching strategy they promote. The latter is the standpoint theory, based on the epistemology of commitment (Harding 1993). As Shannon R. Wooden states, the choice of women writers as part of university syllabi is a "necessary step in the long process of canon expansion and recovery work" (37). The editors do not centre on the Cartesian detachment for knowledge. On the contrary, they underline the importance of the *other*. In this view, communities, not individuals, are the agents of knowledge. Within this perspective the editors follow Lynn Hankinson Nelson (1993: 124) in the praxis of teaching women writers, in that there is no previous knowledge shared by the scientific community (3). Thus, being on the thresholds of knowledge is an opportunity for the exploration of the teaching practice.

Part One of the book is divided into various sections. The first covers the teaching of fiction in order to deal with issues of gender, race, empire and religion. Kristine Swenson approaches the narrative of empire through the autobiographical novel *Saguna. A History of Native Christian Life* (1890), by Krupabai Saththianadhan. Swenson analyses how this text can be paralleled in teaching with novels by Rudyard Kipling, E. M. Forster and other colonial and post-colonial writers. Rebecca Shapiro, on her part, presents a study of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British women writers, but in this case the focus is on the topic of the evangelizing and conversion of Jewish women to Christianity. In her study she explores undergraduate students' responses to questions of class, gender, ethnic and cultural homogeneity in America. In 'Eliza Haywood: Mainstreaming Women Writers in the Undergraduate Survey' Kathryn T.

Flannery analyses Haywood's fiction against other texts of the period, namely Daniel Defoe's 'An Academy for Women' – from *An Essay upon Projects* (1697) – and Mary Astell's *A Serious Proposal to The Ladies* (1694). The analysis of the cultural and literary background of the period allows readers to assess how Haywood's fame and literary career were profoundly affected by Alexander Pope's male-chauvinist mention of her in *The Dunciad* (1729), condemning her to literary ostracism for almost twenty years.

Chapters nine and ten deal with the teaching of Victorian literature, short and long fiction, and how its values are transmitted and perceived. Elizabeth Rose Gruner approaches in 'Short Fiction by Women in the Victorian Literature Survey' the question of whether we should teach the literature the Victorians actually read, or instead, what we now believe was read at the time: a construct known from the 1950s onwards as *the history of literature*. Gruner concludes that using short stories by women "increases the number of texts [perceived to be] by women, creating a greater sense of the actual publication rates of the period and the breadth of literature that real Victorians were reading. It helps demonstrate the ways in which women writers engage both similar and different issues than [sic] male writers ..." (107). In the last article in Part One, Lawrence Zygmunt in "'This Particular Web": George Eliot, Emily Eden, and Locale in Multiplot Fiction' deals, again by opposition, with novels by women writers from the point of view of how different social settings are dealt with by Eden and Eliot.

Teaching strategies in poetry are also explored. In Chapter six Rick Incorvati writes about 'The Poetry of Friendship: Connecting the Histories of Women and Lesbian Sexuality in the Undergraduate Classroom', thus introducing new elements to the collection of essays: those of poetry and the analysis of friendship between women from Aphra Behn to the Romantic period. Chapter seven covers another aspect of poetry in the Romantic period, that of the study of canonical poems by major poets, and compares their aesthetic value with those shown by women poets of the period. Here Elizabeth A. Dolan focuses on the varied responses that readers give them regarding their presentation of the subject matter. James R. Simmons Jr. ponders on another key aspect of teaching and learning: that of the students belonging to a technical university. Just as Dolan had worked by using oppositions, in his analysis 'Pedagogy and Oppositions: Teaching Non-Canonical British Women Writers at the Technical University', Simmons uses various romantic poems by male and female authors with a similar subject matter, so that their different values and attitudes may be assessed by students (100). The subsequent section in the first part deals with nineteenth-century prose.

Part Two, as stated above, opens with an article by Jeanne Moskal entitled 'Making the Student a Scholar' thus promoting the involvement of undergraduates in research projects. Patricia L. Hamilton, on her part, analyses the critical reception of Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* and Fanny Burney's *Evelina* in 'Beyond "Great Crowds" and "Minor Triumphs": Teaching Students to Evaluate Critical Pronouncements'. She shows how often critical statements are usually a biased deterrent for readers since women's works are more often than not qualified as *minor triumphs*, both in past and present pieces of criticism. She and her students explore biased assumptions and rhetoric devices used by literary critics, and show how to read between the lines and identify unsubstantiated prejudices.

Catherine B. Burroughs presents in her article the methodology of teaching women playwrights from the British romantic period (1790-1840), a genre that is often neglected in the present age. Most of the materials presented in this chapter are sample detailed syllabi that include weekly reading assignments and a final questionnaire. The presentation of authentic materials makes instructors' and students' assessments that precede the samples meaningful and extremely useful. The following contribution, 'Working within a Community of Learners: Teaching Christina Rossetti at a Christian College' by Diane Chambers, analyses students' responses to Christina Rossetti at a Christian Evangelical university. Her belief is that teachers have to reconsider previous assumptions and learn from their students in an atmosphere that allows them to be receptive to and challenged by ideas new to them. E. J. Clery is the only scholar from a United Kingdom institution in this book. She shows how new research projects are being implemented in order to enlarge the literary canon by editing unavailable texts and making them accessible to researchers on the Internet. The strategy analysed here is that undergraduate students 'Adopt an Author' and become researchers in that topic, ultimately placing their findings on the project website (Corvey).

Like most of the contributors to *Teaching British Women Writers 1750-1900*, Peaches Henry finds that her main obstacle is "combat[ing] students' negative attitudes about women's prose writing" (166). She asked students to substantiate their opinions and provide evidence against 'recovered' Victorian female intellectuals. In this method of approaching women writers, students themselves realize that in some cases prejudices cannot be sustained, as they were merely reproducing clichés. Chapter seventeen provides an example of student-teacher collaboration in editing Mary Ward's *Marcella*, a novel about education. Nicole Meller Beck and Beth Sutton-Ramspeck, student and teacher, respectively, through their editorial work, undergo a similar educational, "personal, and political project" (188) that parallels that of the novel edited. Gina Luria Walker, in "Can Man Be Free/ And Woman Be a Slave?" Teaching Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Women Writers in Intersecting Communities', describes her experience in teaching two courses on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writers and how they deal with gender issues in their respective literary circles, including among others Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, Mary Hays, Mary Shelley, Percy Shelley and Claire Clairmont. In Chapter nineteen David E. Latané Jr. analyses the popularity of nineteenth-century women poets from their appearance in databases (Chadwyck-Healey Full-Text English Poetry Database), library catalogues (Online Computer Library Centre, Nineteenth-Century Short Title Catalogue, British Library Catalogue) and citations by other poets (percentages of entries and citations are provided). In the last chapter of the collection Prof. William B. Thesing illustrates how some senior professors are brave enough to analyse their teaching practices and, eventually, redirect them. He puts it as follows: "As a full professor and senior scholar who has taught for the twenty-eight years of my career at a research, Ph.D.-granting institution in the South (the University of South Carolina), I am bemused by how my teaching interests on topics relating to gender have developed in the classroom" (224).

The present book is not only a collection of critical essays that explores the various issues of teaching British women writers but also a memorandum of teaching experiences in different milieus. It is helpful from the point of view of presenting

present-day pedagogy of literature; moreover it is a resource book for English literature tutors, since it includes an impressive variety of approaches to teaching modern women writers. A good example of the above is that almost all articles (with the exception of those in chapters eight, ten, fifteen and seventeen) include the syllabi used in the various courses that serve as a basis for the analysis. Hence, one of its main strengths of the book is that it presents detailed materials of the actual courses discussed: sample syllabi (including course descriptions and general objectives, required as well as recommended texts together with course approaches and requirements), class timetables, reading assignments, research projects, sample final exams and students' final questionnaires. Together with that material, which can be used as a guideline for teachers, we come across all the difficulties, prejudices and misunderstandings that hinder the teaching-learning process. By analysing them, different instructors establish varied strategies in order to overcome these obstacles and make first-rate comprehensive teaching and learning possible in university undergraduate contexts.

It would be advisable to enlarge the time span included in the title of this publication since it does not cover the first half of the eighteenth century, studied in Kathryn T. Flannery's article. However, books such as these are always welcome; in this case because finding a thorough reference framework assessment of teaching experiences at graduate and postgraduate level that enables us to evaluate our own teaching practices is a remarkable find indeed. This book is *per se* an interesting text that focuses mainly upon the teaching practices of American universities and which makes evaluative research in the field of English women writers at the Spanish and European level even more necessary.

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