An interview with Germaine Greer

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Joan Fitzpatrick interviewed Germaine Greer, Professor of English at the University of Warwick, who as well as having set up Stump Cross Books, which makes available work by women writers, is working on an edition of the complete works of the seventeenth-century poet Anne Finch, Countess of Winchilsea.

**JF** You began your academic career as a Shakespearean (your PhD was on Shakespeare's early comedies) but you changed direction. Why did you move away from the study of this important canonical figure?

**GG** I am not sure when you think that I changed direction and abandoned work on Shakespeare, presumably not before 1984 when I wrote the volume on Shakespeare in the OUP Past Masters Series, which has been translated into many languages and is still in print. I have taught Shakespeare whenever and wherever I have taught anything and I regularly publish articles on Shakespeare, both in the academic and the popular press. I have introduced videos of Shakespeare plays, written programme notes for productions, acted as a judge of the Globe awards for contributions to the study of Shakespeare, and am the author of the biographical introduction for the republication of Peter Alexander's version. I also lecture at sixth form conferences on Shakespeare; thousands of undergraduates studying Shakespeare will have attended one or other of those lectures. I have chosen not to become a career Shakespearean partly because the vast Shakespeare industry is what keeps students from discovering Shakespeare and is itself profoundly un-Shakesperean in spirit.

**JF** In the introduction to *Kissing The Rod* you and the other editors write that the women poets featured "deserve less summary treatment" than they have hitherto been given and your aim in publishing the anthology was so that the poets "will get the interest and respect that they deserve" (xvi). In *Slip-shod Sibyls* your position appears to be that the efforts of female poets are not worthy of inclusion in the canon, that the poetry is not really very good. Some people will see this as a contradiction and I wonder if you accept this with a postmodern shrug, or whether you changed your position, or whether indeed these statements really are not contradictory.

**GG** Dead women poets could hardly deserve less attention than they had been getting before feminist scholars began working on them in the seventies because they weren't getting any attention at all. This is not to say that they should be studied in preference to the poets who established the genres in which they wrote and the canons of taste by which they expected to be judged. Scholars can give no sensible account of women poets if they study their works without studying what they read or without confronting the problem of influence which is particularly insidious in the case of women. To read Lady Mary Wroth's *Urania* as if it had been written independently
of the *Arcadia* would be absurd, but I have had students who proposed to do just that. Literature is a masculinist invention; poetry in particular is a spectacular form of male display. Women have to adapt a language which objectifies them absolutely to become the speakers, the verbal aggressors; what they too often do is exhibit themselves within an inappropriate rhetoric, only to find themselves merchandised in the most degrading way, until, that is, they are too old to be touted as the muse incarnate who lisped in numbers before she reached enough understanding to recoil from the use that was being made of her. The "respect and attention they deserve" is just that, not less as has historically been the case, but not more either. The sort of triumphalism that sees Aphra Behn's desperate career as a success story and that attributes the ideas present in the texts she translated as her own inventions is unfair to her and, by the by, academically indefensible.

**JF** In *The Obstacle Race* you are concerned with women painters and you refer to "the legends which have grown up around single figures," the stated aim of your book being "to show women artists not as a string of over-rated individuals but as members of a group having much in common" (6). Would you say that the same applies to the work you're doing now with women writers? Are they a group?

**GG** The tenth muse is always one like the Phoenix and she always displaces all other claimants to the title; she is the exception that proves the rule that women have no talent. It makes no odds whether she is the muse of poetry or painting; sometimes (as in the case of Anne Killigrew) she is presented as the tenth muse in both the sister arts of poetry and painting. Painting was a respectable trade for a woman provided she worked within a family context; the same does not hold true for women poets, though we do have the occasional spectacular group like the Brontës. In *Kissing the Rod* we paid special attention to poems that were evidence of communication between women, but we were stretching a point. Katherine Philips, the matchless Orinda, addressed mostly women in her poetry, but only the men wrote back. The lack of communication between, for example Elizabeth Rowe and her contemporary, Anne Finch (only Countess of Winchilsea for the last eight years of her life), is striking, even shocking, in view of the fact that they both enjoyed the protection of Viscount Weymouth and were guests at Longleat at the same times. Yet I do think it important to work out what women writers have in common; one of those things is a tendency to be alienated from their peers.

**JF** In *Kissing the Rod* you and the other editors write "We are also concerned. . . to provide materials for discussion of whether or not there is a female language and a female prosody" (9). Where do you stand on this issue? Do you think it is possible, or desirable, to identify a specifically female language or prosody?

**GG** There are those who think that computer analysis of poetry will provide incontrovertible evidence of authorship by identifying individual patterns of verbalisation. I'm not one of them. Women often write something I call chain syntax, where each clause has equal value to the foregoing and the following. The full stop could go in anywhere or nowhere. I'm not sure whether this syntactic habit is mediated by gender; it may be merely a consequence of ignorance. Few women had sufficient grounding in grammar, as Orinda's letters to Poliarchus make painfully clear. Pope and Johnson would have called the result insipid, but it has strengths -- and ironies -- of its own. Chain syntax links poets as disparate and distant as Aphra
Behn and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. But it's not a point I choose to labour. All women poets are adapting a pre-existing language and working within a framework that they can do little to reshape. Scholars have to be able to estimate how much of what they do is homage to their male models and how much commentary and ironising of those models. The feminine style itself is a male invention. Male writing of women is prescriptive rather than descriptive, but women have no option but to capitulate.

JF On your web-page the stated aim of Stump Cross Books is "to get the seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century women poets better known" (http://www.sxbxsx.com/books.htm). I wonder if you could outline how you've chosen the poets and the works you wish to bring to greater public attention. It seems to me that you might argue i) that as women they have important experiences to articulate, or ii) that by some objective poetic criteria they are worthy of dissemination. It appears that the thrust of *Kissing The Rod* supports the first reason and *Slip-shod Sibyls* argues for the application of the second.

GG It's much simpler than that. I'm interested in women, that means, I am interested in their failures as well as their successes. The experiences they choose to articulate are just that; in most cases they have less to do with life than with literature. Early modern women enduring childbirth disasters describe them in biblical not visceral terms. Their relations with their husbands are exemplary (usually because their husbands are publishing their memoirs as exempla) and evidence of resistance or even resentment is hard to find. Women are the heroines of men's fictions, which they are meant to read. What happens when the heroine takes up the pen? The concern in both cases was and is to get it right. The hard evidence shows that Katherine Philips was ambitious to the point of vainglory, but her reputation for modesty was used to humiliate a generation of professional women writers. One aim is to introduce students to genuine historical complexity and the contradictoriness of the woman writer's position then and now.

JF Would you conceive of Stump Cross Books as a positive act of reversing -- after 300 years -- women's lack of access to the print media? Is there a difference between recovering lost works as historical documents giving us an insight into age, and printing women's works which should have been disseminated more widely in their own time? Perhaps you do not see a distinction between these activities.

GG The notion that women suffered from "lack of access to the print media" is a very good example of a spurious certainty. Gentlemen suffered from exactly the same constraints as gentlewomen; they could not be seen to grant access to their private contemplations or privileged communications to anyone outside their circle let alone anyone who could raise the price of a chapbook or broadsheet. Women suffered as much or more from premature access to print (witness the career of Catherine Trotter or Elizabeth Rowe) as they did from lack of access, in an epoch when manuscript publishing was of far greater relevance to literary culture than the commercial activities of booksellers. Most published women writers, including Margaret Cavendish and Aphra Behn, have no manuscript publication whatsoever. As for their work deserving wider dissemination, suffice it to say that Ephelia's poems were re-issued, because the original publication in 1679 did not sell; Anne Finch's *Miscellany Poems* of 1713 was re-issued twice; Colman and Thornton's edition of
Poems by Eminent Ladies also remained on their hands and was re-issued. Other women poets were best sellers in their own time and even made a lot of money (e. g. Hannah More) but have never been read since, and Felicia Hemans was the best-selling poet of the nineteenth century.

JF Professor Greer, thank you very much.

Responses to this piece intended for the Readers' Forum may be sent to the Editor at L.M.Hopkins@shu.ac.uk.

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