

FEMINIST CHALLENGES

Western Literature: Concepts and Questions

Elke D'hoker

04.10
2022



De resultaten van de canonenquête in detail.

Dichters & Denkers Boekenweek 2021: Herontdekte schrijfsters

Het gouden ei voorbij

Wat is het toch, dat de positie van vrouwelijke schrijvers in de literaire canon steeds maar weer bevochten moet worden? Zelfs in deze tijd, nu de literatuur bruist, schift en kantelt.

Saskia Pieterse

26 mei 2021 – verschenen in [nr. 21](#)



Achtergrond Literatuur

‘Verplicht klassiekers lezen is een verrijking’: nieuwe top 100 zwengelt debat over literaire canon aan

EEN CANON VAN VLAANDEREN

Motieven en bezwaren

Jo Tollebeek
Marc Boone

Karel van Nieuwenhuyse



Het Fixdit-manifest

25 september 2022

Nu in de winkel: Optimistische woede: fix het literatuur, het manifest van schrijverscollectie vrouwelijke schrijvers bundelen de krachten om vrouwen in de letteren te verbeteren. De publicatie van het manifest zal gepaard gaan met een Fixdit-toernooi van boekhandels in Vlaanderen en Nederland.

Literatuur

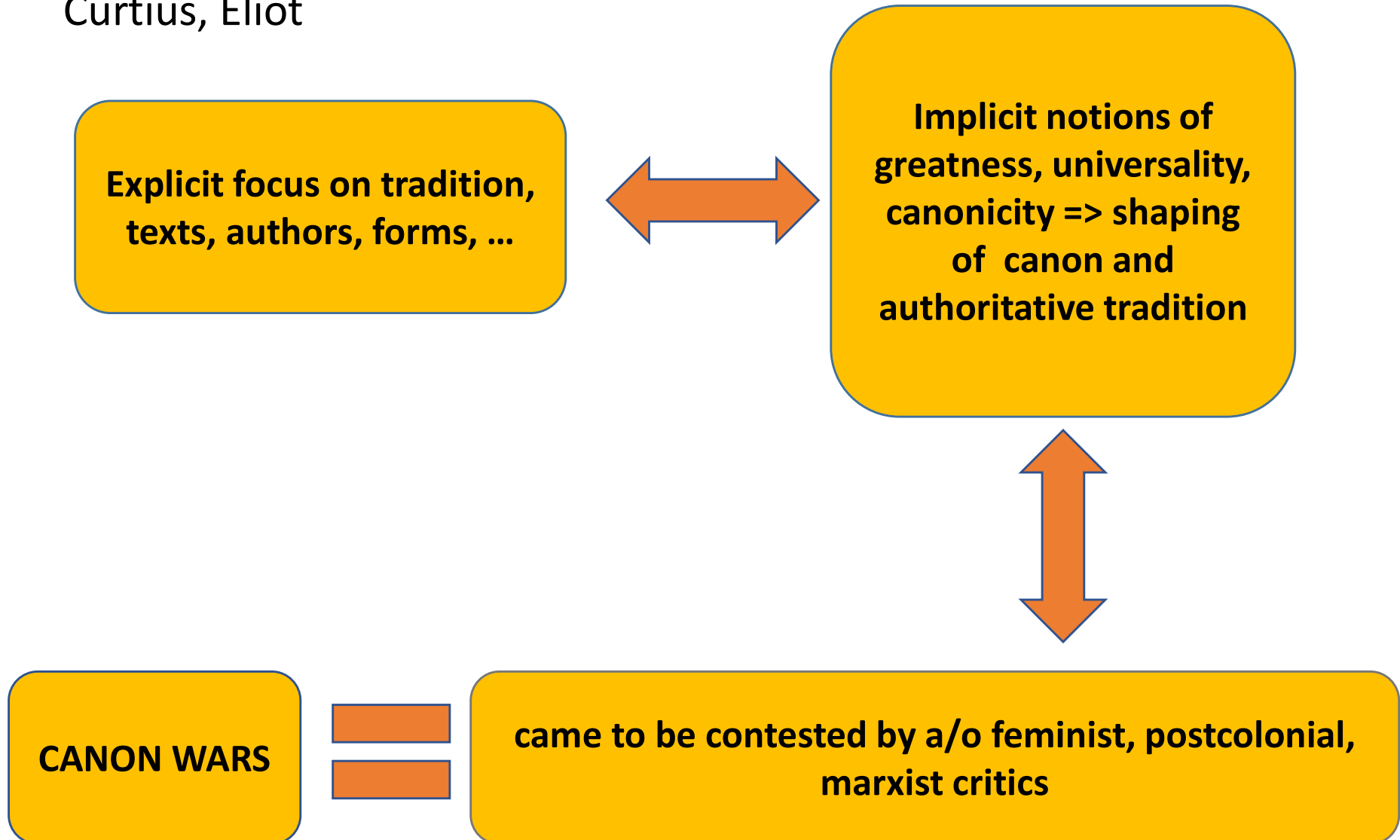
In de nieuwe literaire canon moet je de schrijfsters met een lampje zoeken

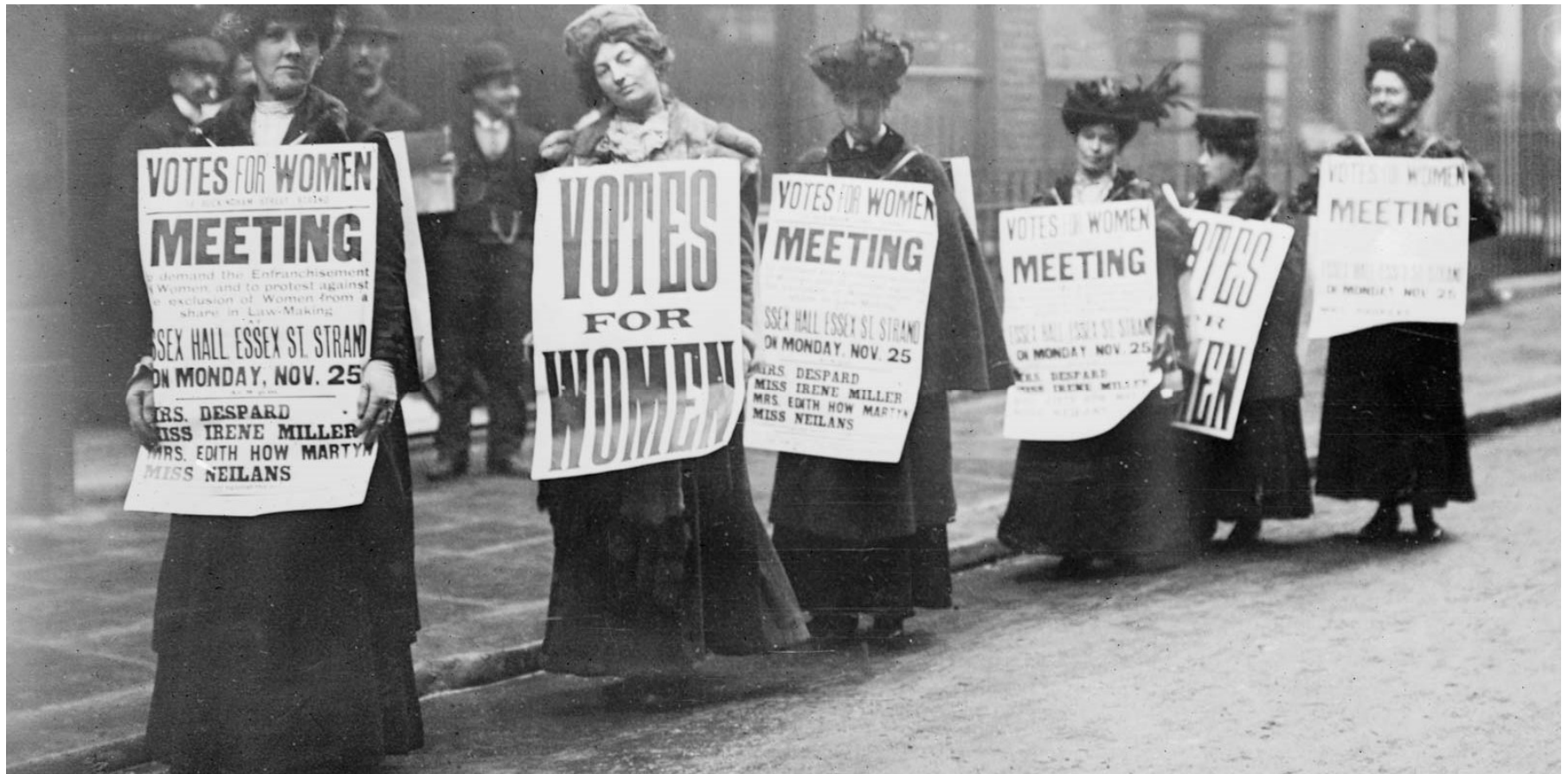
bestel uw exemplaar



OVERVIEW

Constructions of influential notions of Western literature: Auerbach, Curtius, Eliot

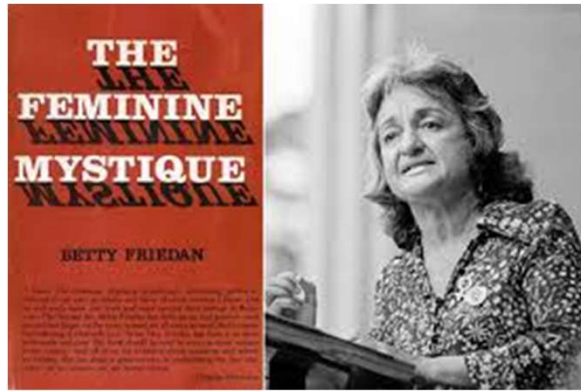




1st wave feminism

1850s-1910s; UK and US
Equality (M. Wollstonecraft, JS Mill)
=> Equal rights: property, divorce,
education rights,
=> Enfranchisement

2nd wave feminism



"American Women" Report: Paving the Way for the Second Wave



- 1960s-1980s
- Equality => discrimination
- Patriarchy & Phallocentrism
- Emancipation, liberation, empowerment
- Difference
- identity/sisterhood



3rd wave feminism

1990s-2000s

Black feminism, post-structuralism, queer studies

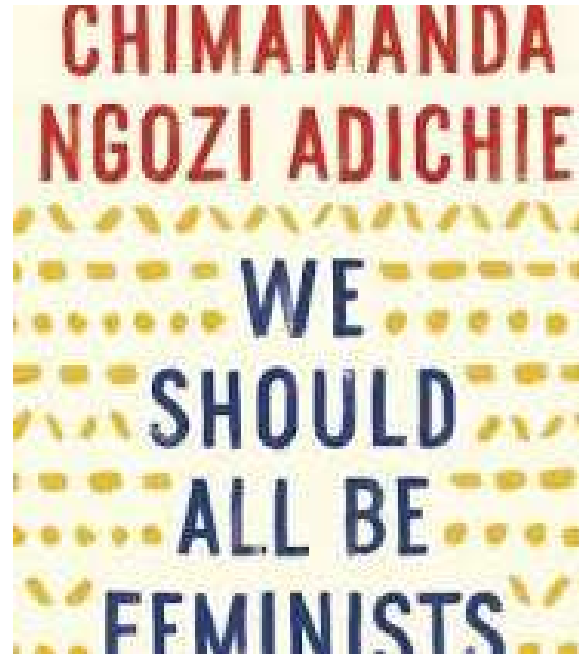
→ Difference between women

→ questioning of sex/gender identity

+ (neo-capitalist) emphasis on free choice and individualism

→ Free choice

→ Post-feminism / consumerist feminism



4th wave
feminism

2010s

Empowerment

Intersectionality

Women's marches / Me Too

LGBTQI

Feminist literary criticism

Part of second-wave feminism

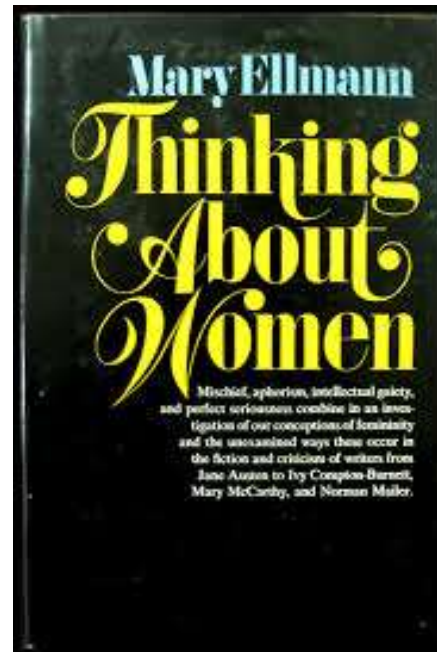
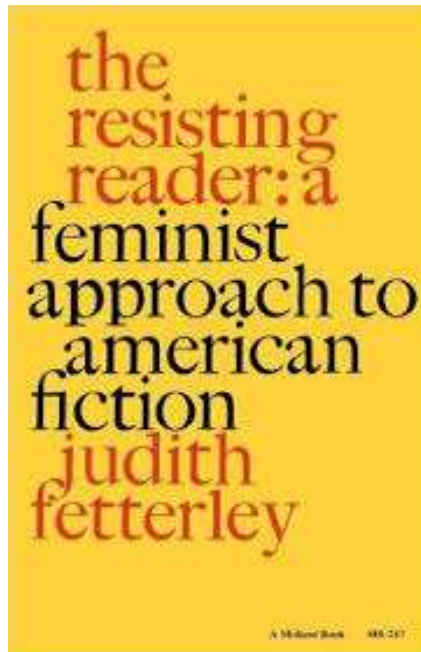
Critics observed paucity of women in literary field/canon

- female experience
- women writers
- women as mediators / consecrators / critics

= Related: white, male canon (patriarchal, phallogentric)

Three approaches

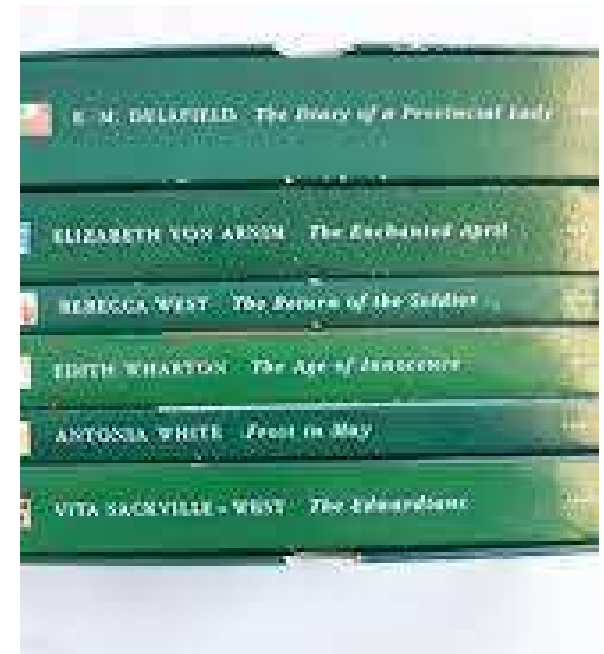
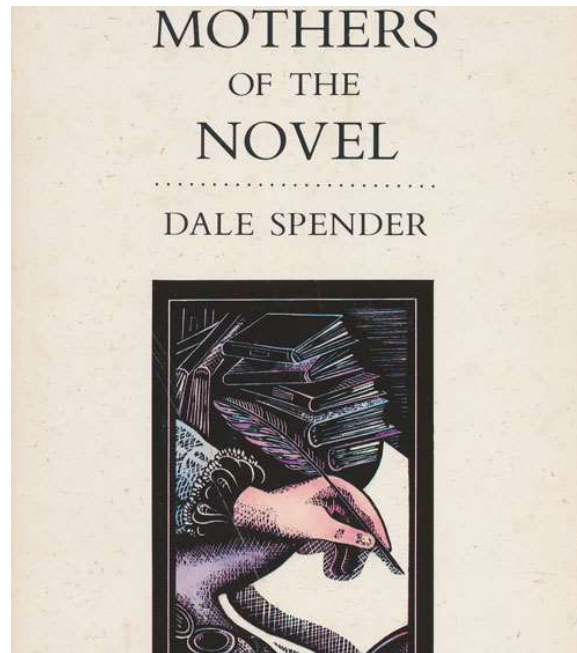
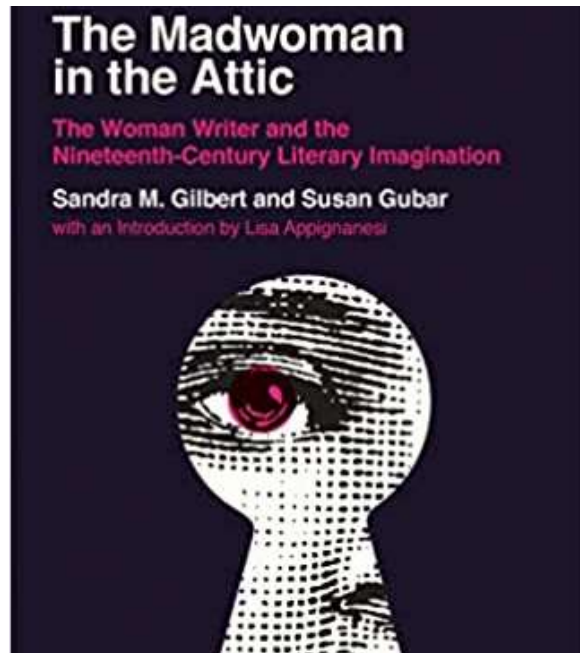
1. Critique
2. Recovery
3. Analysis



Critique

Analysis of how male canon **reflects** and **reinforces** patriarchal norms, power structures, stereotypes,

- Mary Ellmann, *Thinking about Women* (1968)
- Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (1970)
- Eva Figes, *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970)
- Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader* (1978)



Recovery of the work of women writers who had been marginalized, forgotten, or misrepresented

anthologies, republications, literary histories

Recovery

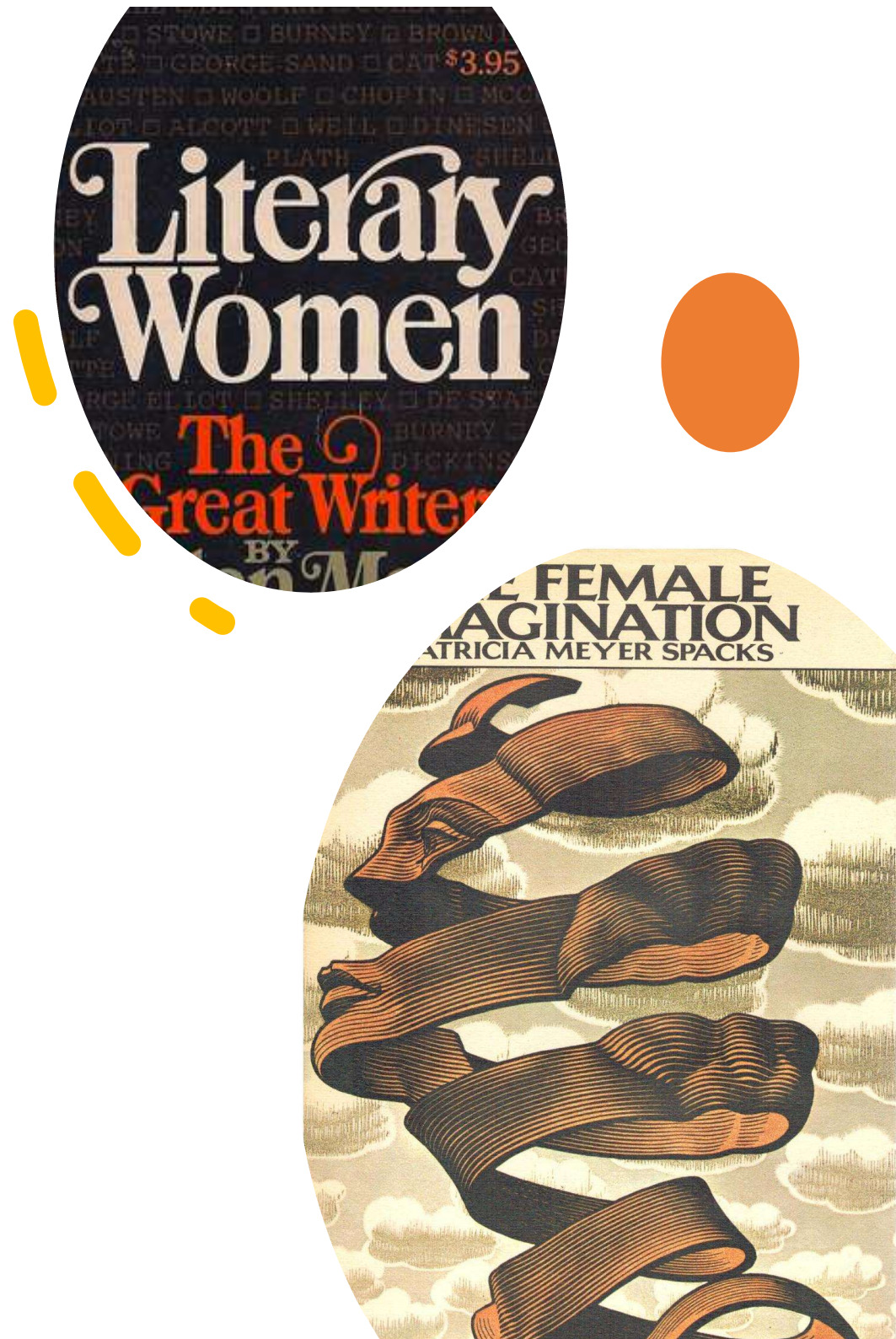
- Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of their Own* (1977)
- Dale Spender, *Mothers of the Novel: 100 Good Women Writers before Jane Austen* (1986)
- Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979)

“It can be argued that Jane Austen achieved the classical perfection of her fiction because there was a mass of women’s novels, excellent, fair, and wretched, for her to study and improve upon” (Moers, *Literary Women*, 1977)

“for readily discernable historical reasons women have characteristically concerned themselves with matter more or less peripheral to male concerns, or at least slightly skewed from them. The differences between traditional female preoccupations and roles and male ones make a difference in female writing.” (Spacks, *The Female Imagination*, 1975)

Dangers

- Separate tradition
- Insufficiently challenges patriarchal categories
- Essentializes difference
- Exclusivist



Analysis

Sought answer to questions: Why has women's writing been sidelined?
Why are there so few women writers in canon?

Aimed to unravel complex compound of factors and processes of marginalization, through empirical study as well as interrogation of ideology

Related to:

1. Production
2. Reception
3. Literary tradition: patterns, plots and myths
4. Canon formation

1. Production: the woman writer

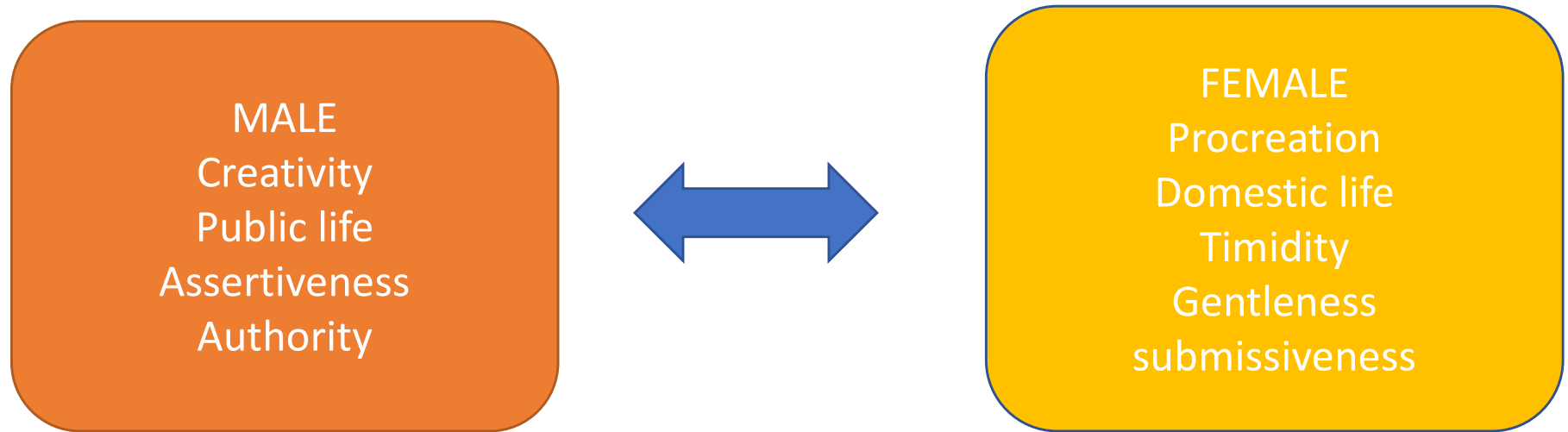
Which **material** and **ideological** constraints have kept women from writing and/or being published?

- Education
- Privacy, money (cf. Woolf, “A Room of One’s Own”)
- Maternal and domestic duties
- Institutions owned by men
- Prohibition and discouragement

“Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life and it ought not to be.” (letter from R. Southey to C. Brontë)

“So often this week, I’ve heard you and Gordon talking while I washed dishes. Well, someone’s got to wash dishes and get food. Otherwise – ‘There’s nothing in the house to eat.’ Yes, I hate hate *hate* doing these things that you accept just as all men accept of their women. I can only play the servant with a very bad grace indeed. [...] And then you say I’m a tyrant, and wonder because I get tired at night! (K. Mansfield to husband)

Gender binary



Conception of artist/writer

“The true artist will let his wife starve, his children go barefoot, and his mother drudge for a living at seventy, sooner than work at anything but his art” (Bernard Shaw)

Virginia Woolf, “Professions for Women” (1931)

What could be easier than to write articles and to buy Persian cats with the profits? But wait a moment. Articles have to be about something. Mine, I seem to remember, was about a novel by a famous man. And while I was writing this review, I discovered that if I were going to review books I should need to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better I called her after the heroine of a famous poem, *The Angel in the House*. It was she who used to come between me and my paper when I was writing reviews. It was she who bothered me and wasted my time and so tormented me that at last I killed her. You who come of a younger and happier generation may not have heard of her—you may not know what I mean by the Angel in the House. I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it—she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace. In those days—the last of Queen Victoria—every house had its Angel. And when I came to write I encountered her with the very first words. The shadow of her wings fell on my page; I heard the rustling of her skirts in the room. Directly, that is to say, I took my pen in my hand to review that novel by a famous man, she slipped behind me and whispered: “My dear, you are a young woman. You are writing about a book that has been written by a man. Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own. Above all, be pure.” And she made as if to guide my pen.

Claire Kilroy, “F is for Phone” (2015)

I used to think of myself as being as free as a man. ‘You’re as good as any son,’ my father would tell me because I was a tough child, strong. My gender proved no limitation. I could parallel park. I wrote two novels in a male voice. Every so often, after readings, I’d get a question about whether it was harder to succeed as a woman in the male-dominated field of literary fiction and, fool that I was, I said no.

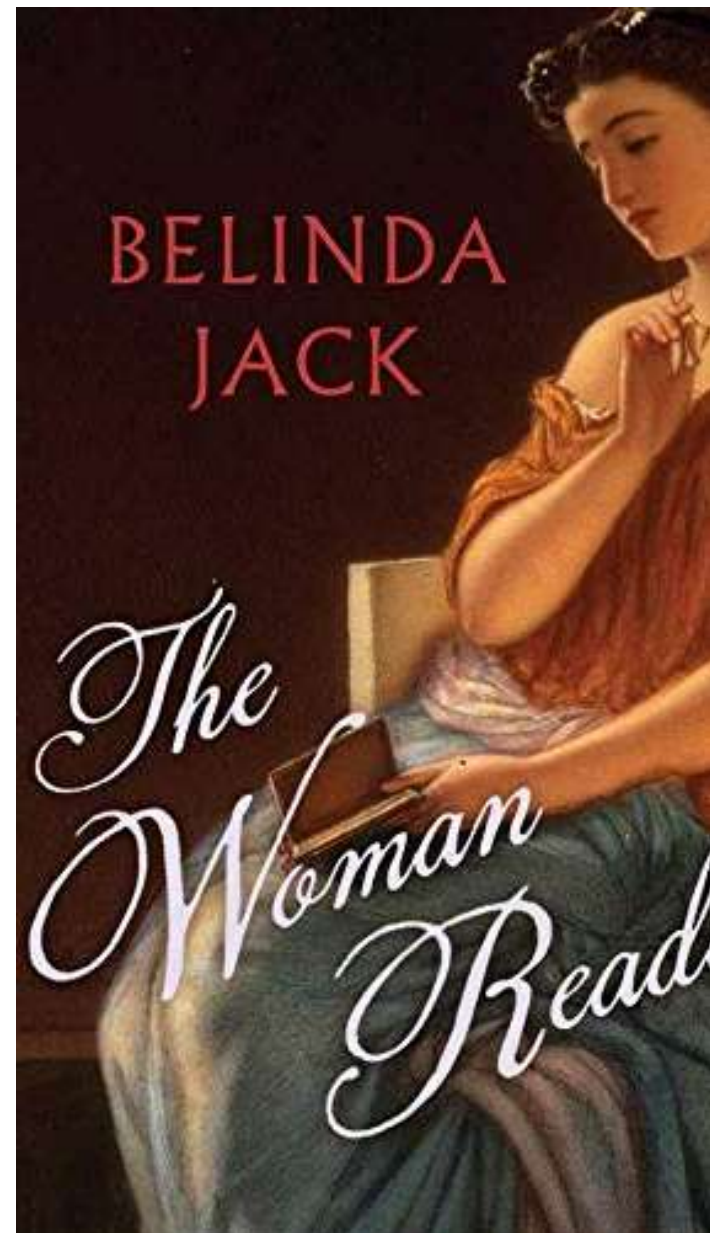
The awful postpartum jealousy of my husband should not have come as a surprise. He could go out. He could just stand up and escape the crisis. I couldn’t because I had this infant clamped to my breast. I’m off for a cycle, he would say, and hot tears of anguish would scald my eyes. I had enjoyed total freedom but I had killed it. More than once, I looked at my body and wished I could cut my breasts off and be like a man again. Mad thoughts, ugly thoughts, self-destructive thoughts. Thoughts I had been fortunate enough never to have experienced before.

<http://winterpapers.com/vol1/selected-content/f-for-phone?page=f-for-phone>

2. Reception of books by women

Women in Publishing, Reviewing the Reviews: A Woman's Place on the Book Page (1987)

- 28 publications in 1985
- 58% of fiction published by women
- 15 to 20 % of books reviewed 10 and 15% of space allotted to them.



VIDA count



LRB: THROUGHOUT THE YEARS

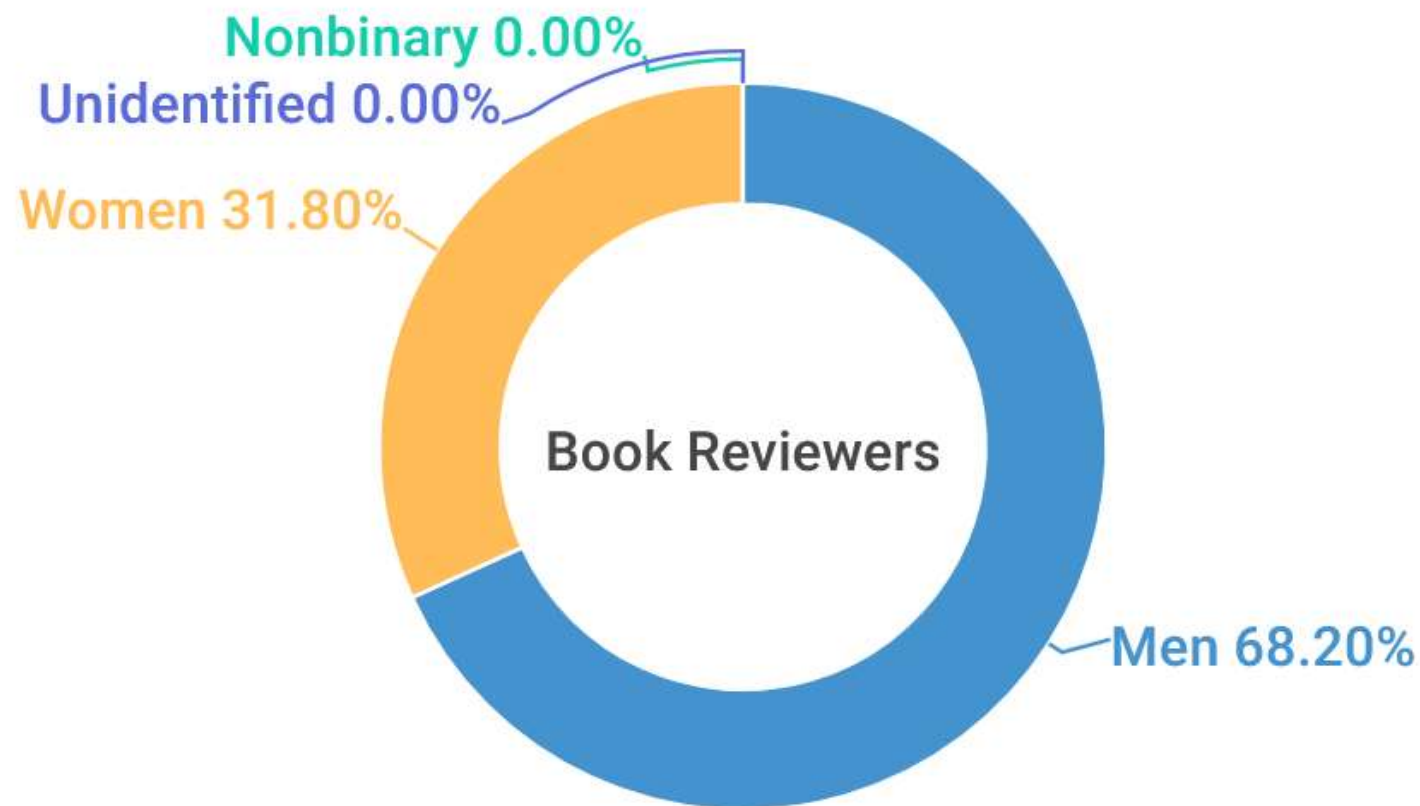


● Men ● Women ● Nonbinary ● Unidentified



LONDON REVIEW OF BOOKS

Book Reviewers

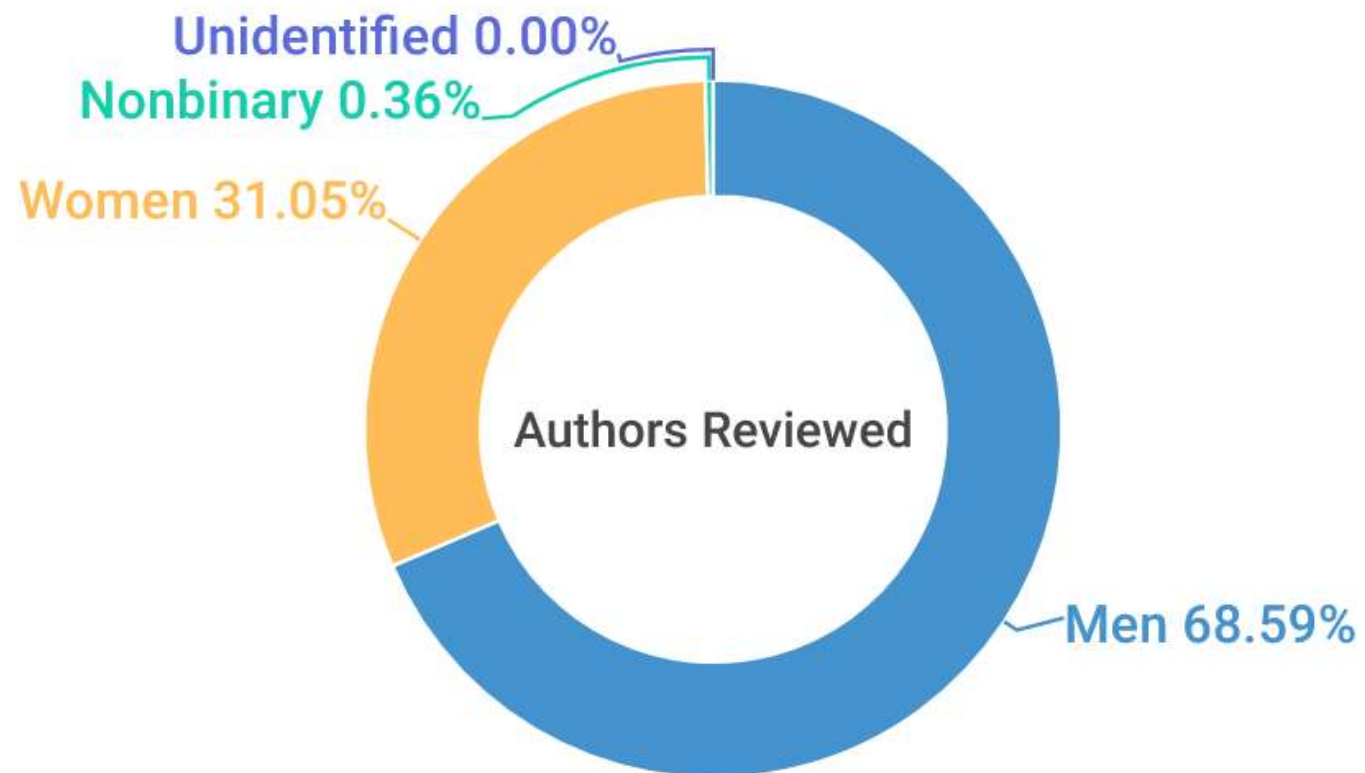




LONDON REVIEW OF BOOKS



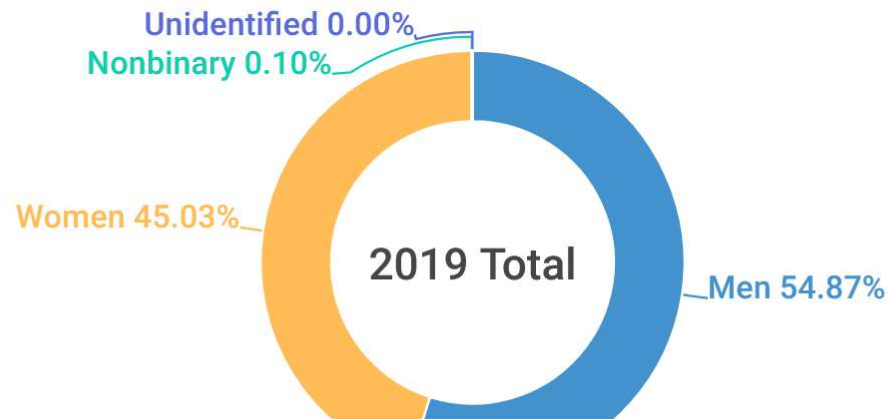
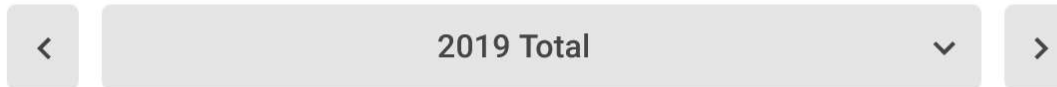
Authors Reviewed





VIDA COUNT 2019

THE NEW YORKER



VIDA
WOMEN IN LITERARY ADTS

[VIDA COUNT](#)

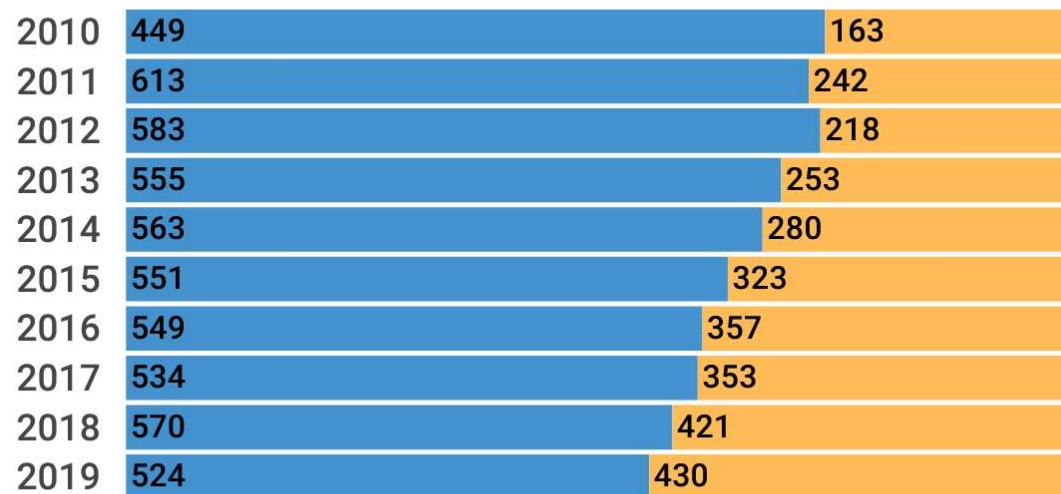
[VIDA REVIEW](#)

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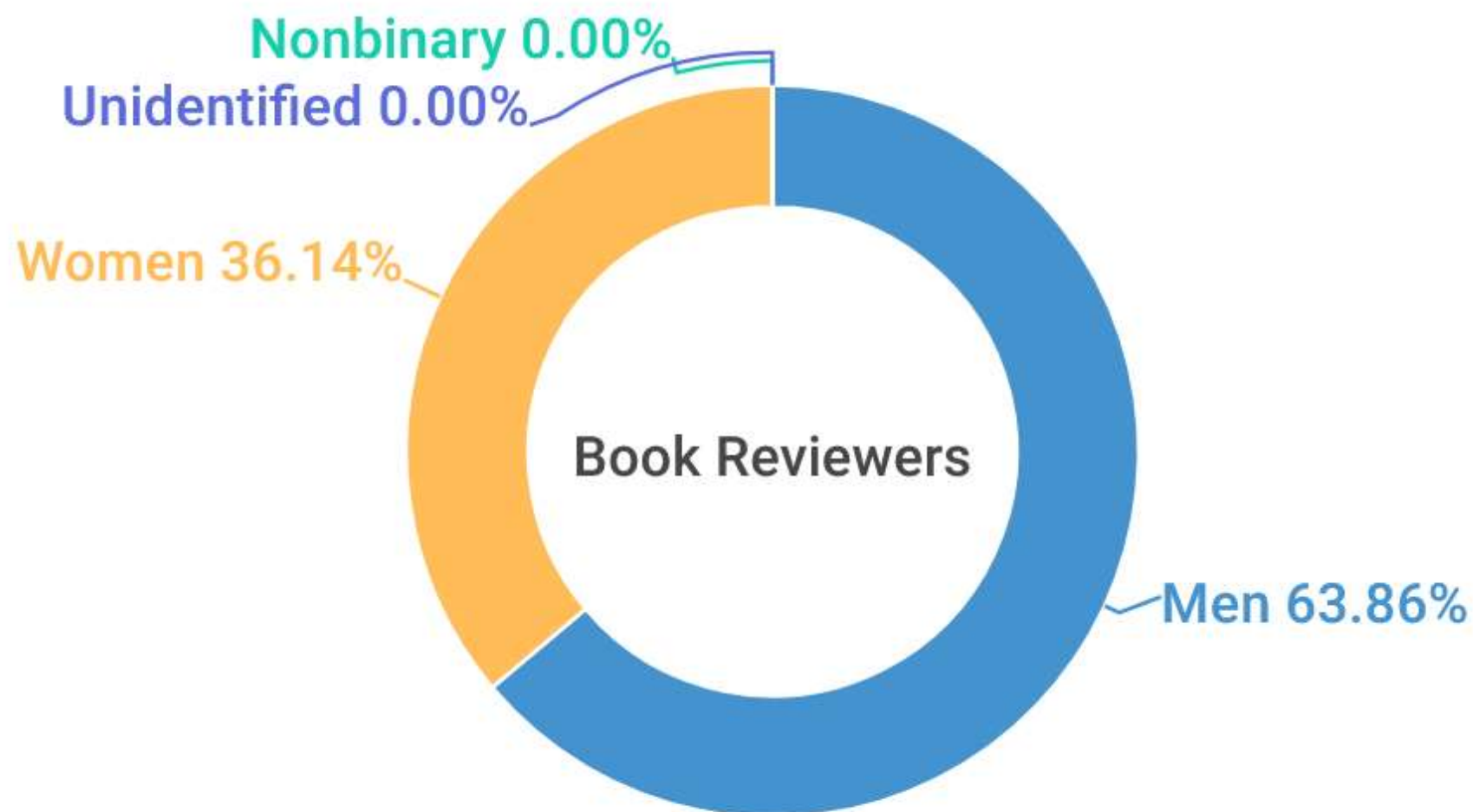
THE NEW YORKER: THROUGHOUT THE YEARS



● Men ● Women ● Nonbinary ● Unidentified

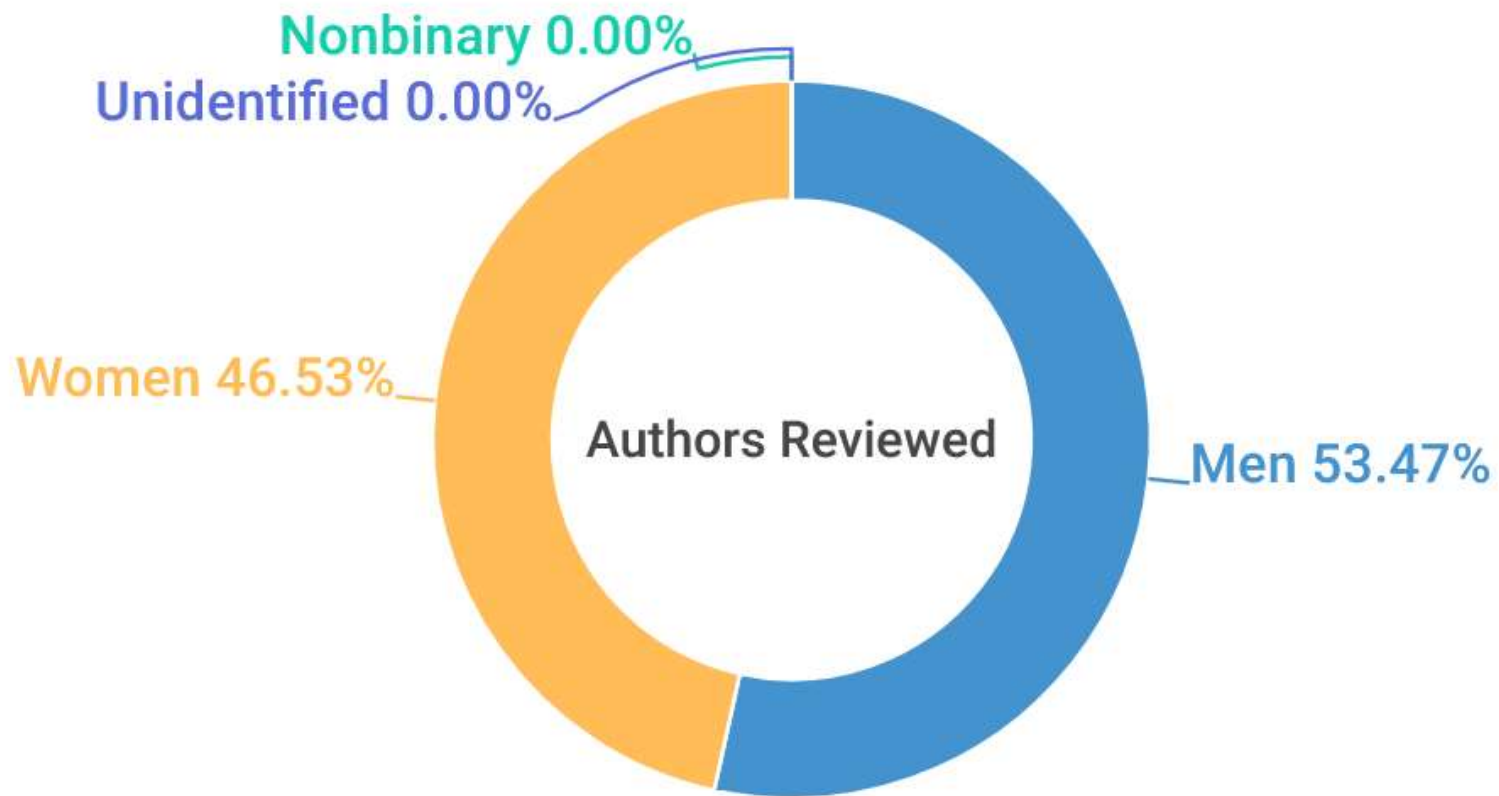


Book Reviewers





Authors Reviewed



Stella count

Stella prize (2011); Stella count

Australian study: J. Lamond and M. Harvey

Book reviewing 1985 – 2013

2/3rd books published by women > 1/3rd books by women reviewed

2021: situation has changed! Several publications now have parity in books reviewed

10 years of the Stella: how Australia's women's writing prize changed a nation's literature

Publishers speak of the profound effect the prize has had on Australia's book industry in the decade since its establishment

- Carole Ohmann, "Emily Brontë in the Hands of Male Critics", College English 32,8 (1971)
- Dale Spender, *The Writing or the Sex? or Why you don't have to read women's writing to know it's no good.* (1989)

She didn't write it. But it's clear she did the deed . . . *She wrote it, but she shouldn't have.*

(It's political, sexual, masculinist, feminist.) *She wrote it, but look what she wrote about.* (The bedroom, the kitchen, her family. Other women!)

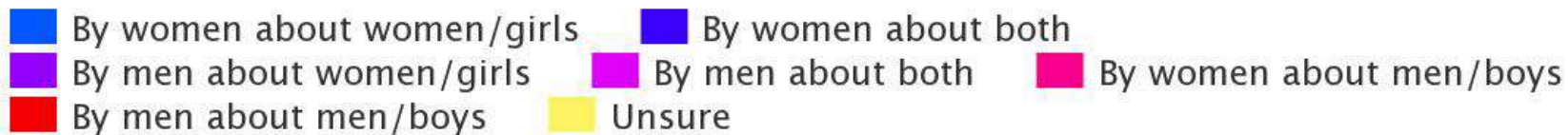
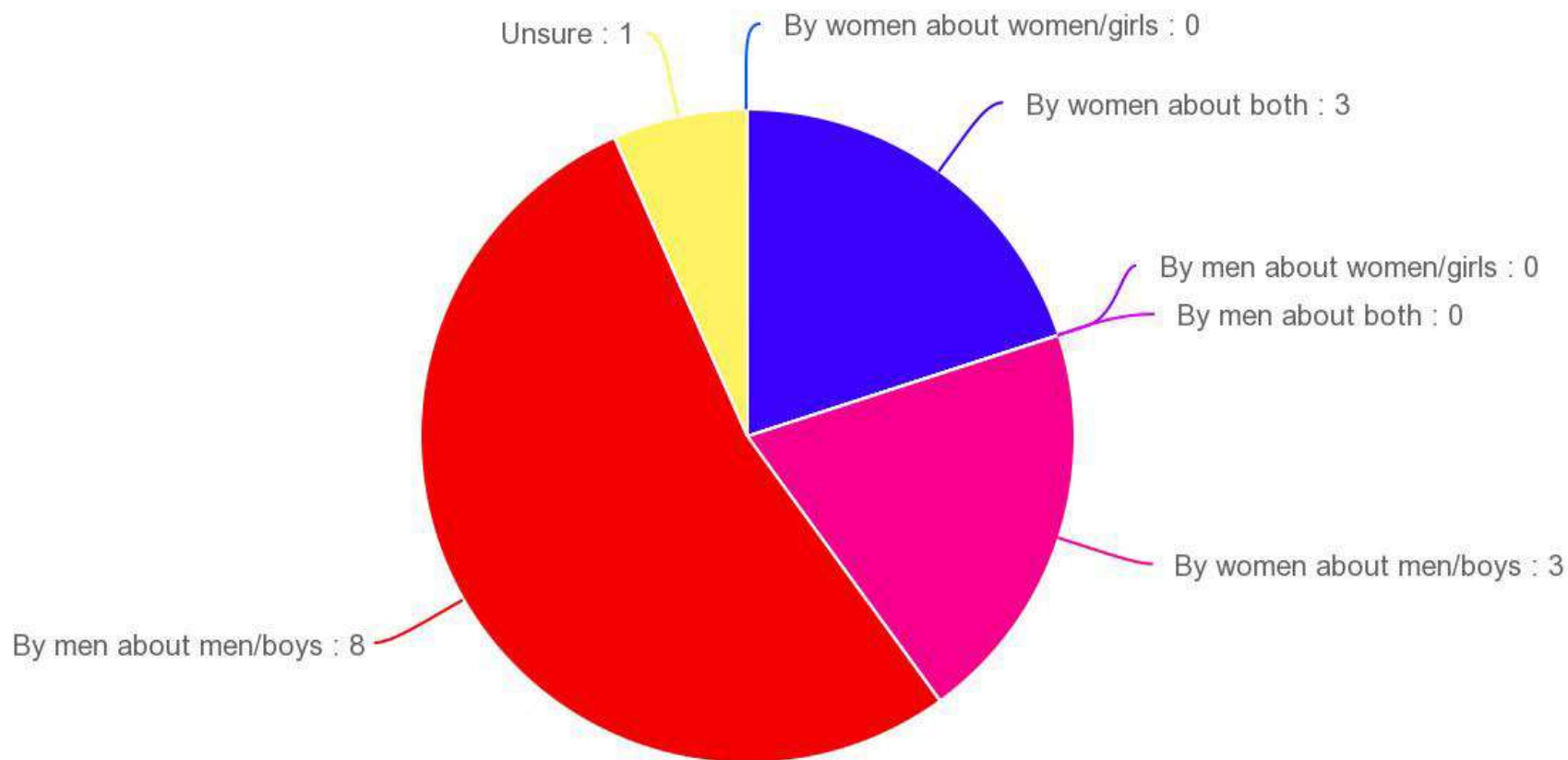
She wrote it, but she wrote only one of it. (Jane Eyre. Poor dear, that's all she ever . . .) *She wrote it, but she isn't really an artist, and it isn't really art.* (It's a thriller, a romance, a children's book. It's not it!)

She wrote it, but she had help. (Robert Browning. Brontë's Brontë. Her own "masculine side.") *She wrote it, but she's an anomaly.* (Well. With Leonardo's help . . .)

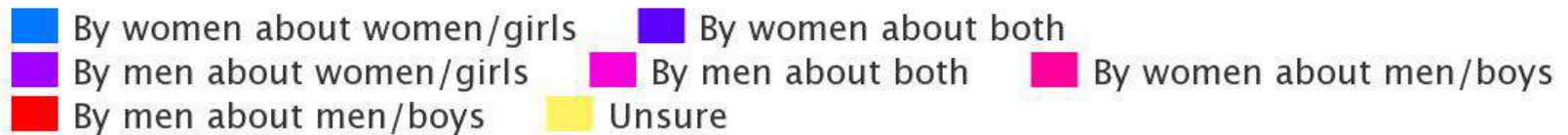
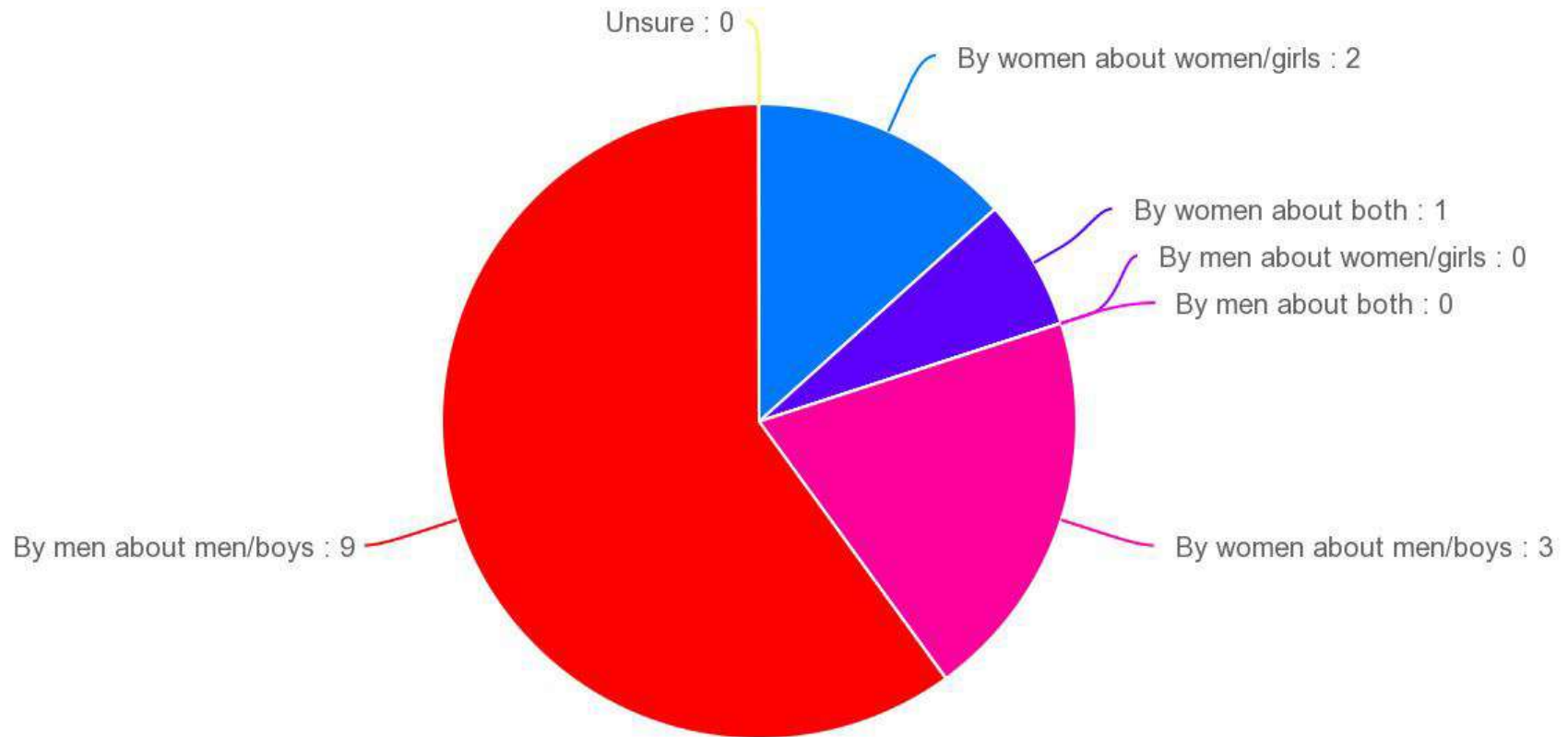
She wrote it BUT . . .

How to Suppress Women's Writing by **Joanna Russ**

Pulitzer Prize 2000 - 2015



Man Booker 2000 - 2014





Woolf & Atwood

from Virginia Woolf, “Women and Fiction” (1929)

“when a woman comes to write a novel, she will find she is permanently wishing to alter the established values—to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what appears to him important. And for that, of course, she will be criticised. For the critic of the opposite sex will be genuinely puzzled and surprised by an attempt to alter the current scale of values, and will see in it not merely a difference of view, but a view that is weak, or trivial, or sentimental because it differs from his own”

from Margaret Atwood, “On Being a Woman Writer” (1982)

“when a man writes about doing the dishes it’s called realism, when a woman writes about doing the dishes it’s the result of an unfortunate genetic limitation”



Reception
influenced by
gender
hierarchy/binary

Shaping evaluation & interpretation
Giving rise to
(a) implicit bias
(b) othering
(c) double standard

3. LITERARY TRADITION

Western Literature:

- Topoi (Curtius)
- Brooding, individualist hero (Bloom)
- 4 myths: Faust, Don Juan, Don Quijote, Robinson Crusoe (Watt)

Feminist critique

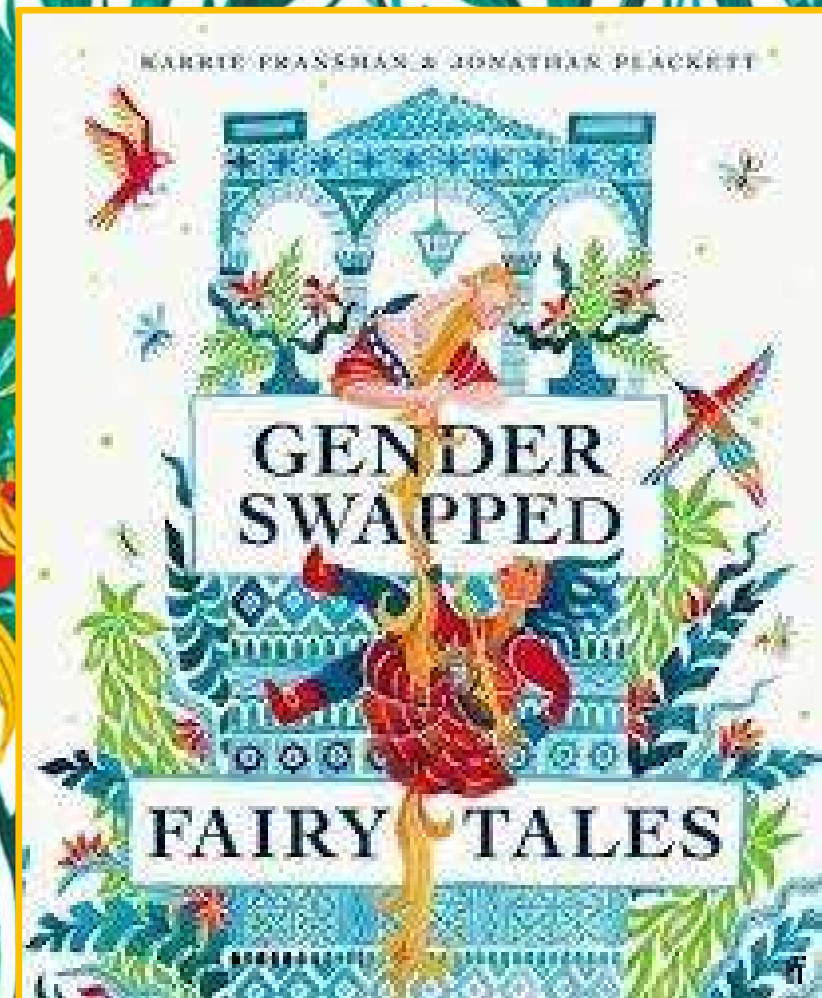
- Plots / myths / tropes are gendered
- Women supporting / stereotypical roles, in relation to men, stereotypical
- Tradition shaped on work of male authors, around male experiences → women writers don't fit
- Affects production, reception, and canon formation



"Great authors of the Western Canon"

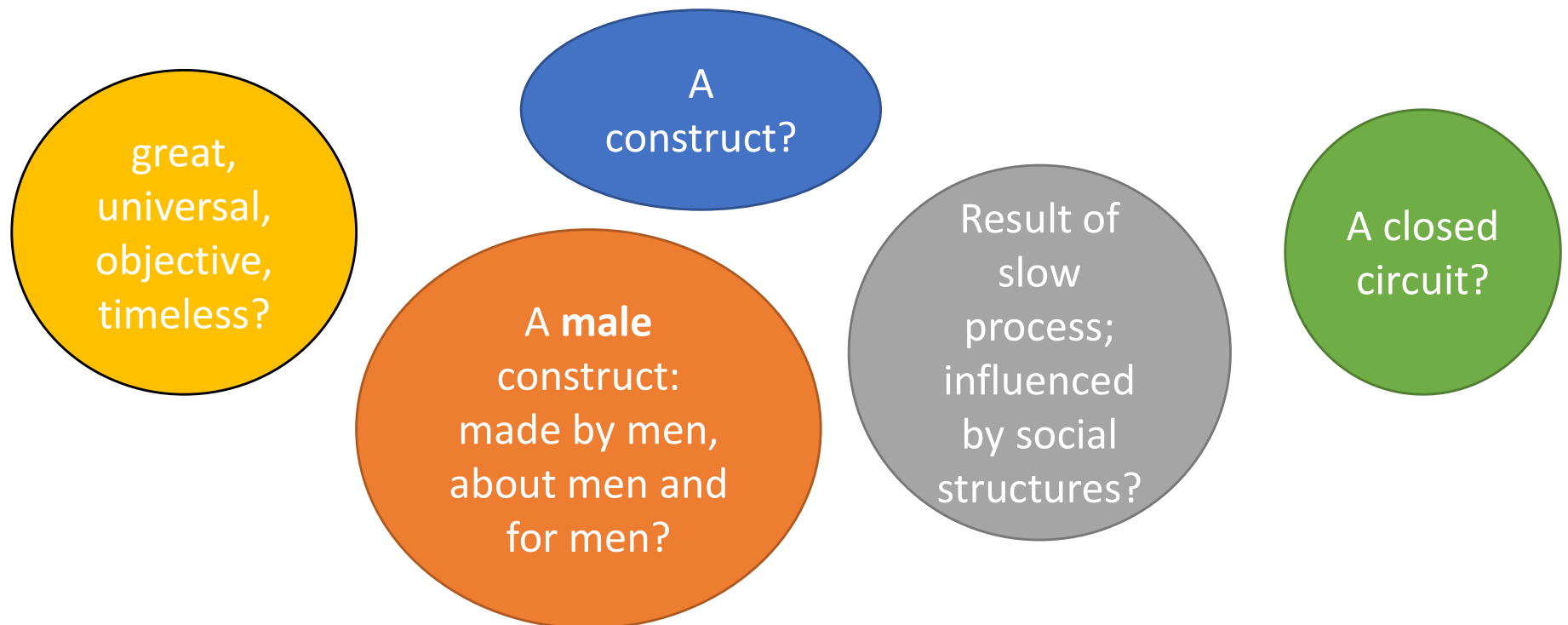
1. Two strong women battle for supremacy in the early West.
2. A young girl in Minnesota finds her womanhood by killing a bear.
3. An English noblewoman, vacationing in Arcadia, falls in love with a beautiful, modest young shepherd. But duty calls, she must return to the court of Elizabeth I to wage war on Spain. Just in time the shepherd lad is revealed as the long-lost son of the Queen of a neighboring country; the lovers are united and our heroine carries off her husband-to-be lad-in-waiting to the King of England.
4. A phosphorescently doomed poetess sponges off her husband and drinks herself to death, thus alienating the community of Philistines and businesswomen who would have continued to give her lecture dates.
5. A handsome young man, quite virginal, is seduced by an older woman who has made a pact with the Devil to give her back her youth. When the woman becomes pregnant, she proudly announces the paternity of her child; this revelation so shames the young man that he goes quite insane, steals into the house where the baby is kept, murders it, and is taken to prison where—repentant and surrounded by angel voices—he dies.
6. Alexandra the Great.
7. A young man who unwisely puts success in business before his personal fulfillment loses his masculinity and ends up as a neurotic, lonely eunuch.
8. A beautiful, seductive boy whose narcissism and instinctive cunning hide the fact that he has no mind (and in fact, hardly any sentient consciousness) drives a succession of successful actresses, movie producers, cowgirls, and film directresses wild with desire. They rape him.

Joanna
Russ,
“What a
heroine
can’t do
or why
women
can’t
write”
(1972)



4. Canon formation

- Critical analysis of processes of canon formation
- How?
 - Case studies
 - General processes of evaluation, transmission, interpretation
- CANON =





A construct?

“... the so-called ‘literary canon’, the unquestioned ‘great tradition’ of the ‘national literature’, has to be recognised as a construct, fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a certain time. There is no such thing as a literary work or tradition which is valuable in itself, regardless of what anyone might have said or come to say about it. ‘Value’ is a transitive term: it means whatever is valued by certain people in specific situations, according to particular criteria in the light of given purposes” (Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 10-11)

A closed circuit?

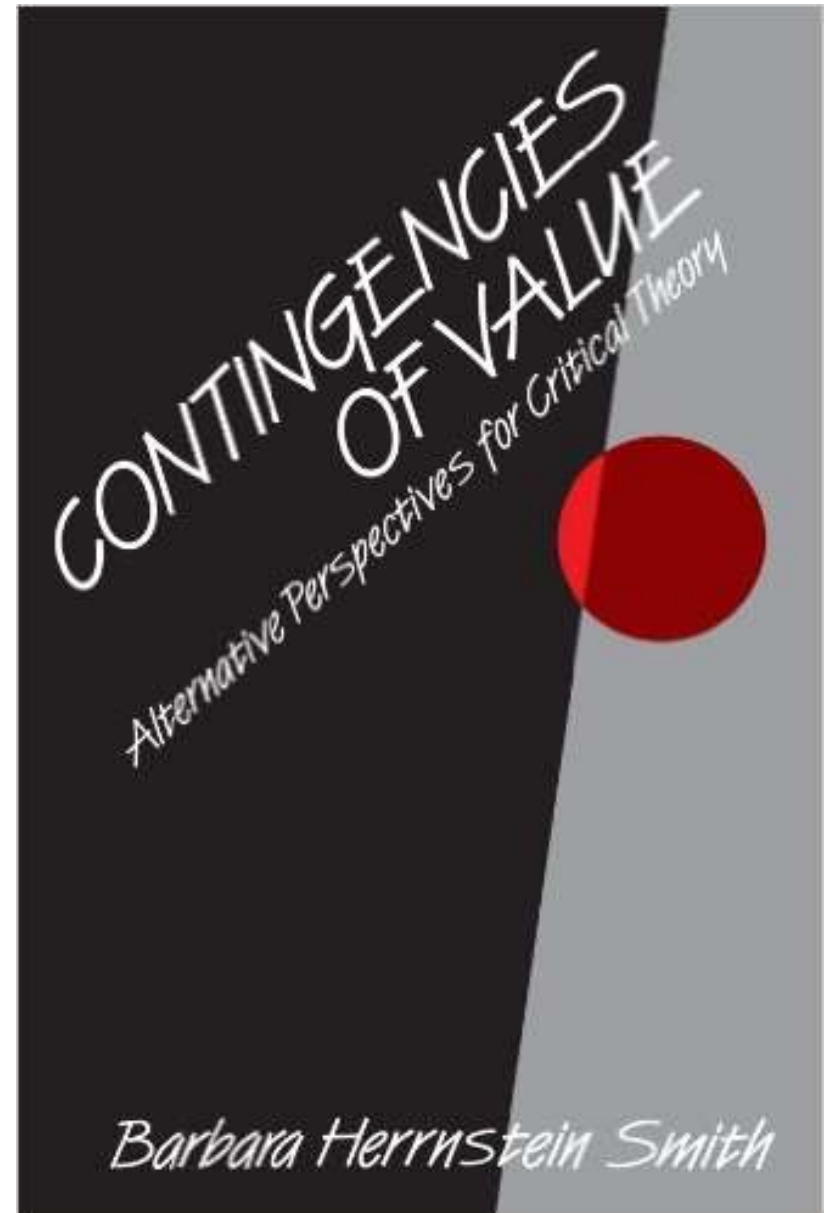
"A stranger comes to the city and is immediately impressed with its orderliness and efficiency. He is told that the good order of the municipality has much to do with the firing of a canon from the castle walls at precisely one o'clock every day. He goes to see the cannon and asks the soldier how he can be sure that it is always precisely one o'clock when he fires. 'Ah', says the soldier, 'each day as I come up here to fire the cannon I pass the jeweller's shop. In the window is a chronometer and beside the chronometer is a sign which says, 'This is the most accurate chronometer in the world.' I set my watch by it and then proceed up here to the walls.'" the stranger is impressed, and as he walks back down towards the city he passes the jeweller's shop. Sure enough, there are the chronometer and the sign. 'How', he asks the jeweller, 'can you be sure that your chronometer is the most accurate in the world? 'Well', says the jeweller, 'every day a cannon is fired from the walls fo the castle at precisely one o'clock. I check my chronometer against it and it is always right.' So it is with the canon of literature. A piece of literature is great because it is in the canon of great works. It is in the canon of great works because it is great." (Fintan O'Toole "Fodder for an Irish canon")

A **male** construct: made by men, about men and for men?

“The canon’s **lack of definition** makes challenging it difficult. There was never an official council set up to determine what books would and would not be read. There are instead many diverse, complex mechanisms for creating a canon of “authentic” literature (authenticity being one of the standard rubrics of canonicity): individual professors, faculty examination and editorial committees, publishing houses and scholarly journals. The nebulousness of these mechanisms was for many years taken to be proof of the choices’ merit—surely, since so many readers independently determined a work’s merit or lack of it, that judgement was accurate, right? Feminist critics began exploring **just how connected, in fact, those apparently independent groups** were: the individual professor read the journals, received the catalogs of the publishing houses; the publishing houses kept in print the books that the individual professors kept ordering for their courses. And most of those individuals making judgments were white upper- and upper-middle-class men. “Independent” judgments, indeed.” (Robyn Warhol, *Feminisms*)

Result of
slow
process;
influenced
by social
structures?

Barbara Herrnstein-Smith, "Contingencies of Value",
Critical Inquiry 10,1 (1983)



"all value is radically contingent => not an inherent property of objects, nor an arbitrary projection of subjects, but rather the product of the dynamics of an economic system" (11)

"coincidence of contingencies among individual subjects will be interpreted by those subjects as noncontingency" (17)

"institutions of evaluative authority will be called upon repeatedly to devise arguments and procedures that validate the community's established tastes and preferences, thereby warding off barbarism...." (18)

“a canonical work will begin to perform certain characteristic cultural functions by virtue of the very fact that it has endured [...] the canonical work begins increasingly not merely to survive within but to shape and create the culture in which its value is produced and transmitted, and for that very reason to perpetuate the conditions of its own flourishing" (28)

“we make texts timeless by supressing their temporality” (29)

“As the preceding discussion suggests, the value of a literary work is continuously produced and re-produced by the very acts of implicit and explicit evaluation that are frequently invoked as ‘reflecting’ its value and therefore as being evidence of it. In other words, what are commonly taken to be the signs of literary value are, in effect, also its springs. The endurance of a classic canonical author such as Homer, then, owes not to the alleged transcultural or universal value of his works, but, on the continuity of their circulation in a particular culture. Repeatedly cited and recited, translated, taught and imitated, and thoroughly enmeshed in the network of intertextuality that continuously constitutes the high culture of the orthodoxly educated population of the West (and the Western-educated population of the rest of the world), that highly variable entity we refer to as “Homer” recurrently enters our experience in relation to a large number of various functions for us and obviously has performed them for many of us over a good bit of the history of our culture. It is well to recall, however, that there are many people in the world who are not – or not yet, or choose not to be – among the orthodoxly educated population of the West: people who do not encounter Western classics at all or who encounter them under cultural and institutional conditions very different from those of American and European college professors and their students. The fact that Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare do not figure significantly in the personal economies of these people, do not perform individual or social functions that gratify their interests, do not have value for them, might properly be taken as qualifying the claims of transcendent universal value made for such works. As we know, however, it is routinely taken instead as evidence or confirmation of the cultural deficiency – or, more piously, ‘deprivation’ – of such people.” (30-31)

Annette Kolodny, “Dancing through the minefield”

feminist literary critic; professor of
American literature

College of Humanities Professor
Emerita of American Literature and
Culture at the University of Arizona in
Tucson

*The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as
Experience and History in American Life
and Letters* (1975) and *The Land
Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of
the American Frontiers, 1630-1860*
(1984) : pioneering works of (feminist)
ecocriticism

2 famous essays in 1980: “Dancing”
and “A Map for Re-Reading: Gender
and the Interpretation of Literary
Texts” (*New Literary History*, Spring
1980).



Siri Hustvedt, “No Competition”

- °1955, Norway
- American novelist and essayist.
- Some books:
 - *The Blindfold* (1992)
 - *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl* (1996)
 - *What I Loved* (2003)
 - *The Summer Without Men* (2011)
 - *The Blazing World* (2014)
 - *Memories of the Future* (2019)



Mary Beard, “The Public Voice of Women” & “Women and Power”

Professor of Classics at the University of Cambridge

Royal Academy of Arts Professor of Ancient Literature.

Several publications on Classical antiquity: e.g.

- *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* (2015)
- *Pompeii: The Life of a Roman Town* (2008)
- *Women & Power: A Manifesto* (2017)

