

Book Reviews

The Writing or the Sex? or Why You Don't Have to Read Women's Writing to Know It's no Good.
Dale Spender, *Elmsford, New York: Pergamon Press, 1989, Pp. 220.*

This book is vintage Dale Spender. She makes statements that will enrage anti-feminists, then proceeds to back them up with convincing statistics and anecdotes. Much of the material has been successfully recycled from her earlier books, and it remains hair-raising and relevant. If Spender has her way, future literature will be judged as much by women as men, and female writers will be as free to write, publish and be reviewed as male writers. It will be wonderful.

Spender first considers spoken language. In the past, she has tape-recorded many conversations among women and men and found that, no matter how talkative and overpowering the women were thought to be, they always talked less than men.¹ In one sample of 14 academic feminists who each believed she had had her fair share of conversation with men, an analysis of the tapes showed that they had spoken between eight and 38 percent of the time. Even the conversation that women do provide is highly likely to be of the supportive, self-effacing — "Really?" "How interesting!" "Do go on" kind. Two of the men she had taped who declared they had NOT had a fair share spoke for 75 and 67 percent of the time (p. 9). The theme running through the book is that, should men and women contribute equally to conversation or literature, it would seem utterly wrong, with women immeasurably dominant.²

Spender then turns to literary criticism, a discipline founded by men and to which few women are allowed entry. The men in charge sometimes spout blatant sexism: "Literary women lack that blood congested genital drive which energises great style" (p. 29), but usually they are more circumspect. Some male experts state that women writers are inferior because they are

restricted to the domestic sphere and, therefore, cannot address universal themes. Does he really mean that family relationships and having babies are not universal? Other men argue that they would willingly consider women's work if there was any to consider. This approach obviously irritates Spender who has written about hundreds of good women writers.³

The chapter on publishing includes data about discrimination against women authors and the well-known open or covert censoring of their work by mainstream publishing houses.⁴ Less well documented has been the phenomenal success of feminist presses such as Virago, Women's Press, Feminist Press and Pandora. Spender notes that women's books are central to the feminist experience, which is virtually ignored in educational systems. Many women, no matter how poor, have their own libraries of women's books, including often one or two which "changed their life." She suggests a possible correlation between the success of feminist publishing and the loss of literature as a prime repository of knowledge, somewhat in the same way that women gained an important place in radio only after television had become ascendant among the media. Literacy is declining, and the secrets of life are now sought in technology and DNA rather than in literature.

While many women authors insist that all is fair and above board in publishing, despite the extensive statistical evidence to the contrary, even these women are dismayed by the relatively few books by women reviewed in mainstream newspapers and magazines. Nor are women often allowed to review books and have the forum this allows them to express their concerns and interests.⁵ One male literary editor, who insisted to Spender that "the pendulum had now swung so far the other way that one had to be female to be reviewed," had allocated just under six percent of review space to women, and chosen only eight percent of reviewers who were women (p. 62). Women's work

that is reviewed is sometimes savaged because it was written by a woman, so that the author feels sexually harassed. One prominent newspaper reviewer noted in his review, "From the photograph supplied of Mss. _____ and _____, I should judge that neither was sexually attractive...." (p. 68).

It is an anomaly that, although women are said to be inferior to men in their writing skills, school girls are, on average, better writers than school boys throughout the educational system. What's happening? Spender notes that boys are given more attention than girls, and more encouragement.⁶ When trainee teachers were asked to comment on the ambiguous remarks on a fictitious report card, they concluded, if they thought the student was female, that she should work harder and might be suitable for secretarial work. If they thought the student was male, they decided, from the same remarks, that he had a great future, perhaps in the Civil Service (p. 103). Many teachers are aware of the double standard, but argue that even if girls and boys do the same work, boys deserve higher marks because the work is harder for them. They teach far fewer poems and stories by women than men, but rationalize this by saying the men's work is better known. Anyway, they say, boys rebel if they have to study more than one or two works by women.

The second part of *The Writing or the Sex?* focusses on talented women authors in the past who either subordinated their writing talents to support a male writer, or who tried to refuse to do this because they valued their own creativity. The writing careers of a number of women such as Jane Carlyle, Emma Hardy and Katherine Mansfield were prevented or diluted because they married demanding men, while the husbands' careers flourished with their wives' support and input to their work. Katherine Mansfield had to encourage her husband even when she was dying; for her own writing, she gained support from a woman friend, Ida Baker, whom she called her "wife" (p. 138).

Spender discusses some men who have stolen women's material and used it in their own work. These include Colette's husband Willy, D.H. Lawrence, Leo Tolstoy and Scott Fitzgerald. Zelda Fitzgerald's creative life is considered in detail. She felt the need to establish her own identity but, when she wrote and had her work published, her husband either expropriated it for his own use or belittled it. These two reactions would seem incompatible, but Scott Fitzgerald was not

rational in his treatment of his wife. When she turned her creativity to ballet, where she would not be competing with her husband, he was able to discourage her in this artform, too. During her nervous breakdown which followed these events, and was likely caused by them, Zelda Fitzgerald wrote a novel about her psychiatric experiences, which her husband wanted to use in his book *Tender is the Night*. He managed to have her novel suppressed, while his became a best seller.

Spender's book is a splendid critique of sexual discrimination in English literature. I hope it will be widely read and stimulate women writers and readers to make changes.

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NOTES

1. Dale Spender. *Man Made Language*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985.
2. Sally Cline and Dale Spender. *Reflecting Men at Twice their Natural Size*. London: André Deutsch, 1987.
3. Dale Spender. *Mothers of the Novel*. London: Pandora Press, 1986; *Writing a New World*. London: Pandora Press, 1988; *The Penguin Anthology of Australian Women's Writing*. Melbourne: Penguin, 1988; *The Anthology of British Women Writers*. London: Pandora Press, 1989.
4. Lynne Spender. *Intruders on the Rights of Men*. London: Pandora Press, 1983.
5. Dale Spender and Lynne Spender. *Scribbling Sisters*. London: Camden Press, 1986.
6. Dale Spender and Elizabeth Sarah (eds.). *Learning to Lose*. London: Women's Press, 1980.

Good-Bye Heathcliff: Changing Heroes, Heroines, Roles, and Values in Women's Category Romances. Mariam Darce Frenier, *Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1988, Pp. 122.*

Good-Bye Heathcliff is published as a book in a series entitled *Contributions in Women Studies*. Certainly there is no question that there is still much more work to be done in the study of category romances and the ways in which they help shape or form women's consciousness, as well as reaffirm