

# Heroinism, Feminism and Humanism: Anna Jameson to Margaret Laurence

I have followed with interest the dialogue which has been taking place between those who believe that we require a feminist literary criticism and those who do not. Since Annette Kolodny's article, "Some Notes on Defining a Feminist Literary Criticism," published in 1975(1) it has been taken up by critics in many other forums. I believe that we do need such a criticism and that women's social and intellectual historians are our best allies. I do not think that such a criticism will be, or should be, exclusively the work of women--but, like Annette Kolodny, I believe that for some time this is likely to be so. Already the work of historians and critics such as Margaret Maison, Vinetta Colby, Elaine Showalter,

by Clara Thomas

Marina Warner, Anne Douglas and Ellen Moers has brought us major developments in discovering, extending and clarifying the frames of reference within which we explore, explain and evaluate the work of our women writers. They have been helping us to develop a vocabulary which we have urgently needed for our full understanding of this work. In this paper I want to talk about Ellen Moers' investigation of "Heroinism," as it applies to the work of some Canadian writers and as it enhances, or confuses, the concerns of feminism. I begin with Margaret Atwood, because she is using the convention of Heroinism with knowing irony and quite clearly setting up its tensions with feminism.

"Heroinism in Literature" is the name of an entire section of Ellen Moers' Literary Women(2) and Margaret Atwood's Lady Oracle(3) compounds several of Moer's sub-categories. "Travelling Heroinism: Gothic for Heroines;" "Loving Heroinism: Feminists in Love;" "Performing Heroinism: The Myth of Corinne;" and "Educating Heroinism: Governess to Governor." Lady Oracle makes ironic uses of traditional Gothic elements of heroinism, going back to Radcliffe, along with social satire and social comedy, whose greatest early female practitioners were Fanny Burney and Jane Austen. Austen's Catherine Morland and Atwood's Joan Foster are linked by more than their self-dramatizing and melodramatic imaginations--their authors cast

similar cool, critical and analytic eyes on the societies in which their heroines must grow to their own potential strength and wisdom or remain fools and victims. "Feminism and heroinism can often be seen to touch in women's literature," says Moers, "but they are not the same." This is the theme of Lady Oracle: feminism strives for true self-definition, personal growth and strength, while heroinism is always in dire danger of being nothing more than a self-dramatizing and self-pitying substitute. Heroinism works best, perhaps only works, as a literary convention, transferring to print and capturing in words the fantasies of us all; feminism is at once more extensive in its possibilities and more limited by individual temperament, capability and circumstance than heroinism--its field is life, and literature is only its shadow. In the end, Margaret Atwood is saying, Joan Foster's growing up is her responsibility and hers only: her achievement, recognition and practice of her own identity (and thus of the true goals of feminism), are within her power and hers alone. Despite her compulsive search for heroinism there is much hope. Again and again Joan sets herself up to be the Gothic maiden-in-distress/victim: again and again she is deflated, but not crushed, forced to abandon the illusory heroine role and to make her own choices. She is much stronger than the escape artist she recognizes in herself, and her essential decency and kindness never

falter. Though at the end she is still unregenerate, busily imagining her next perilous scenario, she is also going back to her home-society and her responsibilities: "the future doesn't appeal to me as much as the past, but I'm sure its better for you."

If you read Lady Oracle as I do, Atwood's implied "message" about the conflicts between heroinism and feminism, extracted from the contemporary circumstances of Joan Foster, is timeless in its commentary on women's choices and dilemmas. In Canada it connects strongly across the years with the work of many writers, among them Susanna Moodie, Catherine Traill, L.M. Montgomery, Sarah Jeannette Duncan, Margaret Laurence and Anna Jameson, who cannot be called a Canadian author, but whose Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada (1838) has always been quoted and considered as one of the most informative, entertaining and accomplished travel-journals of a six months' residence in this country. First in time among the women I have mentioned, Jameson's life and her works fit all of Moers' categories. She was a dedicated and constant pioneer heroinist, for whom Mme. de Stäel was a model in life and Mme. de Stäel's works her models in literature. She lived from 1794 to 1860 and her choices and dilemmas always have seemed to me to be as contemporary as tomorrow morning--or as Joan Foster. She was an early feminist whose ideals

concerning the betterment of women were in the direct lineage of Mary Wollstonecraft, centering always on the need for improvement in women's education. She had to be a cautious feminist because for all her life she had to support herself and members of her family, first by governessing, beginning at age sixteen, and then by her writings--histories, travel books, literary criticism and art criticism. She could not be militantly, abrasively feminist in the political sense and survive, though in her later years, her success and influence secure, she could and did encourage and advise Emily Davies, Bessie Raynor Parkes and other young women who were militantly active in the foundation of the feminist Englishwomen's Journal and in the establishing of Girton College, the first degree-granting institution for women in England. At the core of all of Anna Jameson's work is her obsession with women's position in society and their education--in Canada, for instance, she set out by herself to investigate the situation of Indian women and, after an unprecedented trip as far as Sault Sainte Marie reported her observations at length in her "Summer Rambles." She found that Indian women, in some significant respects concerning both custom and justice, were better off than white women.

My work and Ellen Moers' has a circular relationship in the Jameson-de Stäel area. When I was writing Anna

Jameson's biography, first published ten years ago(4) I found that Mme. de Stäel and her work, particularly Corinne, had been Anna Jameson's constant model and ideal. After the publication of her Literary Women, Ellen Moers wrote to tell me that my book on Anna Jameson had sent her off on the path to Mme. de Stäel, which developed into such an important part of her study. In the section "Performing Heroism: The Myth of Corinne," Moers writes of Anna Jameson this way:

A major fashion set by Corinne as tour guide was the opening of the field of art history to women in the days when there were no academic or curatorial posts available to them. The development can be charted through the career of another important Corinne disciple, Anna Jameson who, in the 1840s and 1850s, wrote books on art that were immensely successful in both England and America and played an important share in forming Victorian taste. Mrs. Jameson began in the 1820s as a governess in the employ of a wealthy family that took her along on their Italian tour. Her Diary of an Ennuyée (1826) is one of the most charming English imitations of Corinne: a hybrid work, part novel, part diary, part guide book, in which the author suppressed the governess and presented herself as a highly improbable English Corinne, that is, as a husbandless, parentless

spinster who most respectfully but in independent grandeur tours the sites of Italy and feasts upon its art.(5)

The books on art that Ellen Moers mentions were Anna Jameson's final works, the five-volume series of Sacred and Legendary Art, published between 1848 and 1864, the last two volumes completed posthumously by her friend, Lady Eastlake, wife of the Curator of the National Gallery. They were influential and went through many editions, just what was required by the eager tourist desiring comprehensive information and the means of developing his artistic appreciation. "Poor Mr. Babcock," wrote Henry James in The American, "was extremely fond of pictures and churches, and carried Mrs. Jameson's works about in his trunk; he delighted in aesthetic analysis, and received peculiar impressions from everything he saw." However, for Anna Jameson's dual concerns of feminism and heroism, so close and sometimes confused in her life and work, the best illustrative texts are Characteristics of Women, the book that established and consolidated her reputation as a writer in 1832, and Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada (1838). Her Diary of an Ennuyée, first published anonymously in 1825 as A Lady's Diary, had been a great success. When her authorship was discovered (and she was not reluctant about discovery), she was, in the word of the day, "lionized" in London's literary society, a heady

experience for one who had been financially forced into governessing at age sixteen, whose dream of dreams was to lead an intellectual coterie like Mme. de Stäel's own and to shine with the fame and genius of de Stäel's great improvisatrice, Corinne. Her next two works, Memoirs of the Loves of the Poets (1829) and Memoirs of Celebrated Female Sovereigns (1831), were informative, effusive and descriptive, polite and educational reading for the growing mass female audience, with plenty of implicit moral teaching, but with no overtly didactic thesis. When she wrote her study of Shakespeare's heroines, however, she felt secure enough in her position as a writer to move with confidence into the role of avowed educator. She prefaced the work with a long dialogue between Alda, a personification of herself, and Medon, a gentleman friend and peer. Her thesis, argued out with Medon, is that the education of young ladies as it presently stands, is tragically inadequate to their needs, a forcing system producing accomplishments, not qualities, leaving them quite inadequately prepared to be even "the mothers and nurses of legislators and statesmen," let alone wise or reflective in the political sense:

Medon: Then you think that a better education, based on truer moral principles, would render women more reasonable politicians, or at least give them some rights to meddle with politics?

Alda: It would cease in that case to be meddling, as you term it, for it would be legitimized. It is easy to sneer at political and mathematical ladies, and quote Lord Byron--but oh, leave those angry commonplaces to others!--they do not come well from you. Do not force me to remind you, that women have achieved enough to silence them forever [she footnotes Mme. de Stäel, Mrs. Somerville, Harriet Martineau, and Mrs. Marcet].(6)

Alda further argues that models from life are not adequate for her teaching: "I wanted character in its essential truth not modified by particular customs, by fashion, by situation." (p.39) This symbolic model she found supremely achieved in Shakespeare's women. She categorizes and discusses them under four headings: Characters of Intellect, Characters of Passion and Imagination, Characters of the Affections and Historical Characters. Her repeated didactic purpose is to hold these characters up as models to be emulated --Portia, for instance--or of terrible examples to be pitied and avoided--Cleopatra or Lady Macbeth. Here Anna Jameson's heroinism, for the first time in her writing, is in full play--Shakespeare's heroines are abstracted from their dramas to become a Pantheon of Goddesses for the edification and the emulation of her readers; their qualities become, for her and filtered through her sensibility, the "characteristics of women."

During the time that she wrote the book, Anna Jameson was very close to the young Fanny Kemble, of the great Siddons-Kemble dynasty of actors. Fanny was doubtful about Mrs. Jameson's title and thought the book should have been called Shakespeare's Heroines. She was the daughter of Charles Kemble, owner, with his brother John, of the Covent Garden Theatre, and niece of Sarah Siddons. When Anna was beginning her Characteristics of Women, Fanny had just scored her first tremendous success as Juliet on the stage of Covent Garden. She and Anna became close friends; Anna consulted with her constantly through the writing of her book; there are important areas in which Characteristics of Women reflects the Kemble-Siddons "Method-Acting" of the day as well as reflecting Anna Jameson's reading of Shakespeare. However, no one was more aware than Fanny Kemble of the difference between life and art, of the illusions of her stage life and the plain, hard facts of ordinary existence in her famous family, where financial anxiety was constant and all the Kembles and Sarah Siddons worked hard and constantly at respectability and social conformity, to remove the lingering aura of social stigma that still threatened actors in England. Fanny's doubts, however, did not prevail. Anna Jameson's book was published as Characteristics of Women. It had a great success both at home and abroad, particularly in Germany and America, and it subsequently appeared

in at least 20 editions (there may well be others, pirated editions unrecorded). It was influential in its day and long after. But, unwittingly, in trying to teach women and to promote a better education for them, Anna Jameson's first important work almost certainly fostered heroinism and self-dramatizing, not the self-developing feminism which she hoped to encourage. When she wrote Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada, however, the pattern of Corinne which she used made her book a success in her day and in ours. She came to Canada, not to stay, but to work out a separation agreement with her husband, Robert Jameson, who had been appointed Upper Canada's Attorney General and, while she was here, its first Vice-Chancellor. By 1836 Anna was too much the successful and cosmopolitan literary woman to contemplate seriously either picking up a marriage-relationship which had been unsatisfactory even before her husband was posted out of England in 1833, or living away from friends, family--and her readership--in an outpost of Empire. Legally, however, she and all women were still completely dependent on their husbands. Agitation towards reform of the Property Acts was just beginning; the first legislation giving married women some rights over their children and their earnings was not passed until 1854. Meanwhile Robert Jameson could have claimed all of Anna's income had he so desired. Because he wanted and needed an appearance of conventional domes-

ticity in the months preceding his appointment to the highest legal position in Upper Canada, Anna came; her part of the bargain would be his agreement to separation and some financial support--the latter, in fact, never materialized. Because she was a professional writer, she also had every intention of making a book out of the trip that she undertook so reluctantly.

For the "Winter Studies" part of her work, the months from December, 1836, to May, 1837, when she was confined to Toronto, she adopted the same journal form and the same persona, the sad and lonely, vaguely broken-hearted heroine, that she had used for Diary of an Ennuyée. In that voice she wrote a classic little textbook in the manner of the Educating Heroine on the entire spectrum of social life and politics in Upper Canada at the time. When she set out on her travels in the spring, the voice of her work changed radically. Her "Summer Rambles" might well be subtitled "Corinne in Canada," for its narrator is the Travelling Heroine par excellence, high-spirited, enthusiastic, untiring, undaunted, indefatigable, meeting, enjoying--and impressing--a great variety of people, and carrying her research on the condition of women into the Indian encampments on Michilimakinac and into a Chippewa tribe at Sault Ste. Marie. There her success was complete. She became an honorary member of the tribe and was given her Indian name,

after being the first white woman to shoot the rapids at the Sault. She also became an honorary daughter to Mrs. Johnson, the Chippewa chieftain of the tribe. (Incidentally, no facet of Heroinism was neglected by Anna Jameson. She carried a guitar with her on her travels--the Performing Heroine, the Canadian Corinne, at the ready.) Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada is of a quality that begs for a more sophisticated critical curiosity and consideration than its conventional categorizing as "Travel Diary" displays; to recognize that it was written so knowingly out of a major European and feminist literary tradition extends its interest enormously.

Despite its dangers as a model for life, adopting the heroine persona has meant literary success for numbers of Canadian women writers since the time of Anna Jameson. The enduring attraction of Roughing It in the Bush lies in the character that Susanna Moodie drew of herself--self-pitying, sentimental, snobbish, always centre-stage but also indomitable, determined on survival with dignity and with humour --a heroine in process of agonized transformation from a comfortably middle-class drawing-room lady to a battle-scarred, but not beaten, pioneer wife, mother and writer. The culture-shock that she suffered in coming to Canada turned her to writing as a therapy and the dire financial straits of the Moodies gave an added impetus to her pen. She wrote the various

sketches that make up Roughing It in the Bush with an honesty and a creative energy that are poles apart from such sentimental effusions of her English writing career as, for instance, "The Miser's Son."

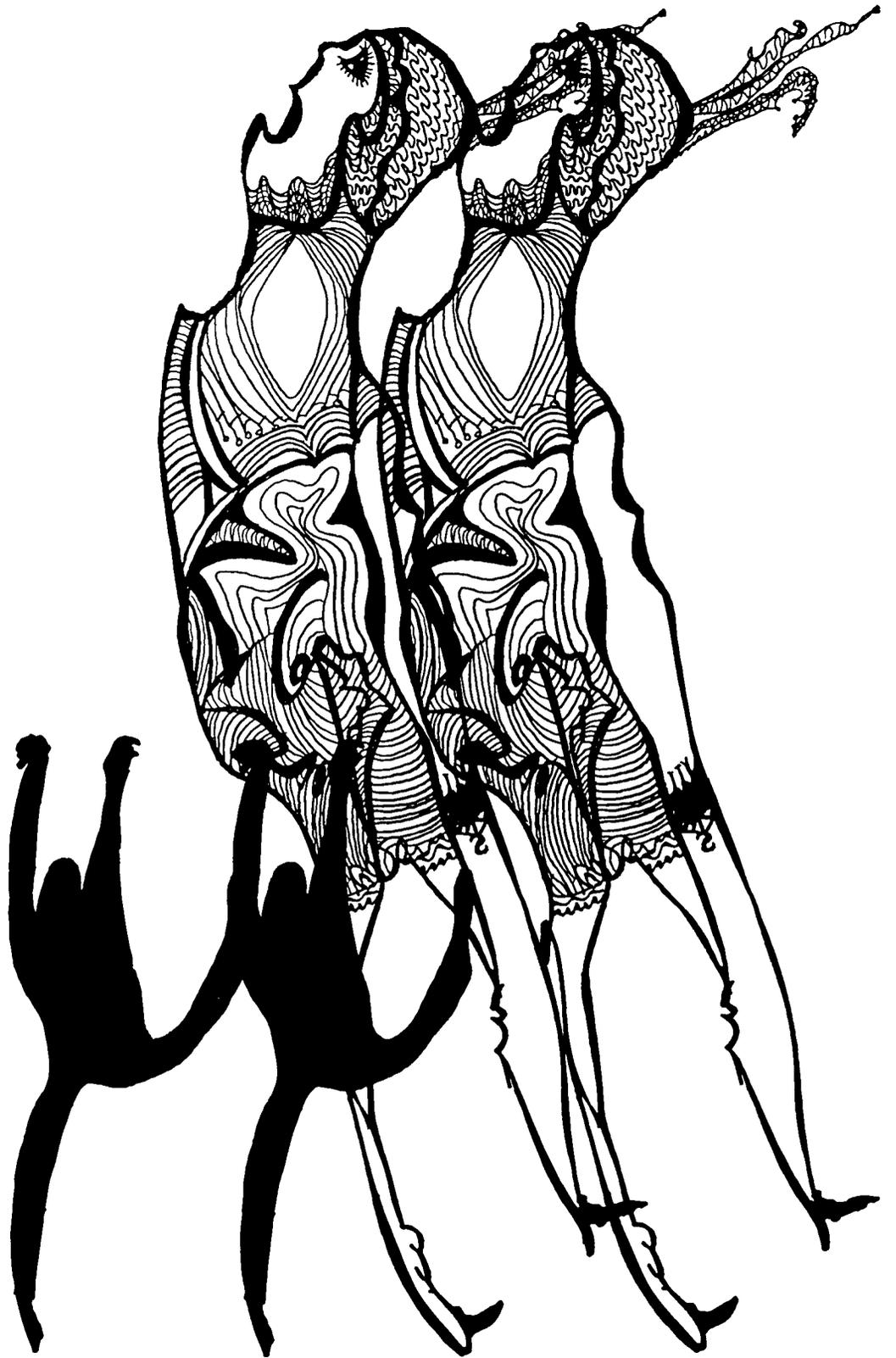
Moodie, the author, could and did communicate the ironic distance between Susanna's blundering, often misplaced and ludicrous heroinism and the life of the real Susanna, who bore children in her bush homestead, learned to cook, bake bread and housekeep, fight fires, hoe potatoes, cope with her neighbours and with poverty. By the end of the book the heroine is completely usurped by the real woman. When, finally, largely through her own desperate efforts in getting a sheriff's appointment for her husband, Susanna is delivered from the bush to the relative ease of life in Belleville, she feels old and she looks old. Her words ring with truth and with pathos, as if a lifetime away from her early posturings.

The concepts of heroinism and feminism can also be used to explore Sarah Jeannette Duncan's work. Sarah Duncan was herself a feminist, as a reading of her journalism abundantly demonstrates. She was one of the first generation of Canadian women to break away from her society's accepted and intensely powerful definition of the "proper sphere" of women, to practice internationally a venturesome, independent and successful career in

journalism. Yet when she came to write her novels she often fell back on the literary convention of heroinism though, as her work shows, she herself was scornful of its delusions. The gap between what Duncan herself knew and practiced and what her authorial voice expressed accounts for the condescending tone which she often directed at both her characters and her readers.

The nagging insufficiency that surrounds the character of Advena Murchison in The Imperialist is a case in point. On the one hand, Advena is shown to be a young feminist who is her mother's despair because she has rejected the role of homemaker-in-training; on the other hand, her author casts her--or shows us Advena casting herself--in the traditional role of heroine, a role with which Duncan herself had little sympathy. Subsequently Duncan forces the romance of Advena and Finlay to its conventional close by the clumsy device of Dr. Drummond as an unlikely deus ex machina, leaving no one, least of all herself, I should think, satisfied by her strangely fractured characterization.

In A Daughter of Today (1894) Duncan overcame ambivalence in the portrayal of her heroine but at the expense of authorial sympathy. Her indictment of the young woman who goes abroad to become an artist and fails, tragically, together with the book's uncompromising



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harshness of tone, are both surprising in a writer who, herself, had left home to follow a career. It is not the heroine's desire to have a career that she chastises so severely, however; it is her adopting of the role of heroine-artist with a selfish disregard for her responsibilities to parents and friends and with an unjustifiably elevated estimate of her own abilities, that Duncan is unmasking without mercy.

In Middlemarch, Dorothea Casaubon is a "failed heroine," as Ellen Moers remarks. Sarah Jeannette Duncan is no George Eliot but, like her great predecessor, she had the perception to know that the illusion of heroinism could lead one disastrously away from self-knowledge and growth. Her perception, however, was not matched by anything like the power of understanding and analysis that Eliot brought to her fiction. In drawing Advena Murchison, Duncan capitulated to the convention of heroinism; in A Daughter of Today, her heroine is the victim of Duncan's anger at the convention and its disastrous transposition into real life; in A Social Departure (1890), the narrating "I," though herself certainly a Travelling Heroine, often takes a tiresomely indulgent and condescending tone to her companion, Orthodocia, the romantic heroine of the piece. In Simple Adventures of a Memsahib (1893), Sarah Duncan does achieve a narrative voice that is without condescension--Mrs.

MacIntyre, her narrator, has grown beyond the illusions of heroinism. Like Susanna Moodie in Canada, she has survived the long and arduous initiation of her decades in India and her convincing voice speaks to us with sharp wit but also with understanding and pathos.

Exploration into the relationships and tensions between heroinism and feminism could productively be extended to the work of any of our women writers. There is finally, however, another stage to be marked in the development of both women writers and their characters. It could be categorized as "humanism." Certainly the male equivalents of the heroinism-feminism-humanism trio could be argued to move directly from heroism to humanism without the necessity for an intermediate term. In a traditionally male-ordered society the intermediate ground of feminist struggle and self-assertion is totally necessary to women; in the work of many contemporary writers a movement beyond feminism is discernible but only after the difficult assertions have been achieved and the struggle for self-definition undertaken. Morag Gunn, for instance, struggles against her society and its pressures to achieve her own freedom to do the work that she must do. But what, in the last analysis, is most important is that she perceives, accepts and celebrates the limits of her freedom within an ultimate universal order that requires every in-

dividual's respect for all other individuals and for all the generations of humankind. Like Hagar Shipley, she fights first for herself and then to be freed from herself into the humility and understanding that humanism requires.

NOTES

1. Annette Kolodny, "Some Notes on Defining a Feminist Literary Criticism," Critical Inquiry, Vol. 2, 1 (Autumn, 1975).
2. Ellen Moers, Literary Women (New York, 1976).
3. Margaret Atwood, Lady Oracle (Toronto, 1976).
4. Clara Thomas, Love and Work Enough: The Life of Anna Jameson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1968; London: Macdonald, 1968; Toronto: University of Toronto Press paperback, 1978).
5. Moers, pp. 187-88.
6. Anna Jameson, Characteristics of Women: Moral, Poetical and Historical (London, 1833), p. 36. Subsequent references are to this edition.

