

struggle of the feminine spirit to survive. In her story "Boys and Girls," for example, she looks at the kind of compromise women have had to make, surrendering power in order to remain human.

Briefly then the isolating of the feminine voice in terms of language is a difficult, perhaps impossible, task. But listening to what the voice is saying is immediately revealing.



## Audrey Thomas

I will confess that until I was invited to this conference I had never thought very much about whether I was part of a feminine tradition in literature or whether, in a good sense, there was such a thing as a "feminine voice" in our novels, stories, plays and poems. Perhaps I avoided thinking about it because I did not wish to be labelled a "feminine writer" (a woman, say, who writes only for other women) the same way I have always sidestepped the question of whether I am an "American" or "Canadian" writer. I was simply a woman who was born in the United States and happened to choose Canada as her (adult) home. Leave me alone, please, and let me get on with my writing.

But knowing that I was coming here, to listen, to discuss, with other women writers made me think and made me study up. Now I am tremendously excited. I see how my own work has been shaped by some of the great women of the past, Harriet Beecher Stowe, whom I read in an illustrated edition when I was very very young (and who had an enormous influence on the women of her own and the succeeding, generation), Louisa May Alcott, Willa Cather, Sigrid Undquist, Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing and so on. I see terrible gaps which I am determined to fill--Mrs Gaskell,

George Sand, Madame de Staël--and I see my woeful ignorance of women's writing in other languages than my own.

We must discuss whether something united all those women other than a fierce desire to write. I think there is, and it might be called the will to voluntary creativity.

There are female images and female ways of looking at the world, interior or exterior. For if there is one thing that unites all the women at the conference, that needs no translator, it is our biology. For about 30 years of our lives we prepare each month for an event which generally does not take place. We ovulate, we bleed. Before this event, ages one to twelve, say, and after, in our fifties and beyond, this fact is still part of our "Becoming" or our "Been." I do think it is only fairly recently that women writers have dealt overtly with this kind of experience. Where Philip Sydney's muse told him to look in his Heart and write, our muse has been telling us to look a little farther down. Our visceral imagination is now coming to the fore.

Going back over my own works, I re-read my first "real" story, real because it had to be written, it seemed to be the only way I could organize the horror and utter futility of a six-months long, drawn-out miscarriage

in a hospital in Africa. (There had been dozens of stories before this but none were real and honest). The woman who tells the story is in the last hour of her futile labour and her mind dwells naturally on images of birth and death. She imagines Mary, mother of Christ, first at the Annunciation, where she "fantasizes" the Holy Ghost as a kind of Door-to-Door Salesman, and then at the birth itself. I'd just like to round off these remarks with these two passages. There is, by the way, a perfectly legitimate word "Maculate" but it is rarely used.

And Mary, how did she take it, I wonder, the original, the appalling announcement . . . the burden thrust upon her? 'No, really, some other time . . . the spring planting . . . my aged mother . . . quite impossible. Very good of you to think of me of course but I couldn't take it on. Perhaps, you'll call in again next year.' (Dismiss him firmly while there's still time. Don't let him get both feet in the door. Be firm and final. 'No thank you, I never accept free gifts.'")

Then later:

And the days were accomplished. Unfair to gloss that over . . . to make so little of the waiting . . . the months . . . the hours. They make no mention of the hours; but of course, men wrote it down. How were they to

know? After the immaculate conception, after the refusal at the inn . . . came the maculate delivery . . . the manger. And all that noise . . . cattle lowing (and doing other things besides) . . . angels blaring away . . . the eerie light.

Men wrote it down.

St. Matthew: "And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name Jesus."

St. Mark (Jesus is already grown) "And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized of John in Jordan."

St. Luke at least refers to Mary "being great with child," but then says "and so it was, that, while they were there [in Bethlehem] the days were accomplished that she should be delivered."

St. John: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us."

## WOMEN AND THE THEATRICAL TRADITION

Gwen Pharis Ringwood

I'm glad to be here, a first opportunity to exchange thoughts with a sisterhood of writers and to see the capital of my country.

How can we explain the scarcity of women dramatists in the past? Certainly they are scarce. In discussions of the Oriental theatre, in anthologies of Greek and Roman plays, Elizabethan and French plays, I find no women dramatists mentioned. Even the informal theatre of the Commedia dell'Arte, the Miracle, Mystery and Guild plays seems to have been dominated by men.

One exception is Hrotswitha of Gandersheim, a St. Benedict nun born about 935 a.d., who wrote plays in Latin glorifying virginity and chastity and following in form the bawdy comedies of Terence. She was troubled in conscience because to show her saintly characters contending with evil she must mention "things which should not be named." As she completed a play, Hrotswitha, flushed with trepidation, slipped down dark stone corridors to hand the scroll to some traveller who would deliver it to her mentor, a man high in the church. He preserved the plays but it was not until 1501 that they were discovered and printed. On either side of this young nun the centuries seem devoid of women playwrights. Novelists, poets, essayists yes. Playwrights of stature--no.