**Treason Our Text: Feminist Challenges to the Literary Canon**

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In an essay that originally appeared in Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature (1983), Robinson discusses the feminist challenge to the literary canon, which critiques the neglect of many women writers and the distortion and misreading of the few recognized women writers. According to Robinson, feminist criticism can either emphasize alternative readings that reinterpret women's character and actions and thus challenge sexist ideology, or it can focus on expanding the canon to include more women writers. In fact, the origins of feminist literary study are associated with "discovery, republication, and reappraisal of 'lost' or undervalued writers and their work." The next step is to determine if the recovered works meet existing aesthetic quality criteria or if the criteria intrinsically excludes women and thus need to be revised. In addition to the creation of a "feminist countercanon," feminist critics have sought to establish a female literary tradition. During the course of her discussion, Robinson notes the different concerns raised by black and lesbian feminist scholars and addresses the issue of inclusion within feminist criticism.

Successful plots have often had gunpowder in them. Feminist critics have gone so far as to take treason to the canon as our text.¹

— JANE MARCUS

**The Lofty Seat of Canonized Bards (Pollok, 1827)**

As with many other restrictive institutions, we are hardly aware of it until we come into conflict with it; the elements of the literary canon are simply absorbed by the apprentice scholar and critic in the normal course of graduate education, without anyone's ever seeming to inculcate or defend them. Appeal, were any necessary, would be to the other meaning of "canon," that is, to established standards of judgment and of taste. Not that either definition is presented as rigid and immutable — far from it, for lectures in literary history are full of wry references to a benighted though hardly distant past.

when, say, the metaphysical poets were insufficiently appreciated or Vachel Lindsay was the most modern poet recognized in American literature. Whence the acknowledgment of a subjective dimension, sometimes generalized as "sensibility," to the category of taste. Sweeping modifications in the canon are said to occur because of changes in collective sensibility, but individual admissions and elevations from "minor" to "major" status tend to be achieved by successful critical promotion, which is to say, demonstration that a particular author does meet generally accepted criteria of excellence.

The results, moreover, are nowhere codified: they are neither set down in a single place, nor are they absolutely uniform. In the visual arts and in music, the cold realities of patronage, purchase, presentation in private and public collections, or performance on concert programs create the conditions for a work's canonical status or lack of it. No equivalent set of institutional arrangements exists for literature, however. The fact of publication and even the feat of remaining in print for generations, which are at least analogous to the ways in which pictures and music are displayed, are not the same sort of indicators; they represent less of an investment and hence less general acceptance of their canonicity. In the circumstances, it may seem somewhat of an exaggeration to speak of "the" literary canon, almost paranoid to call it an institution, downright hysterical to characterize that institution as restrictive. The whole business is so much more informal, after all, than any of these terms implies, the concomitant processes so much more gentlemanly. Surely, it is more like a gentleman's agreement than a repressive instrument — isn't it?

But a gentleman is inescapably — that is, by definition — a member of a privileged class and of the male sex. From this perspective, it is probably quite accurate to think of the canon as an entirely gentlemanly artifact, considering how few works by nonmembers of that class and sex make it into the informal agglomeration of course syllabi, anthologies, and widely commented-upon "standard authors" that constitutes the canon as it is generally understood. For, beyond their availability on bookshelves, it is through the teaching and study — one might even say the habitual teaching and study — of certain works that they become institutionalized as canonical literature. Within that broad canon, moreover, those admitted but read only in advanced courses, commented upon only by more or less narrow specialists, are subjected to the further tyranny of "major" versus "minor."

For more than a decade now, feminist scholars have been protesting the apparently systematic neglect of women's experience in the literary canon, neglect that takes the form of distorting and misreading the few recognized female writers and excluding the others. Moreover, the argument runs, the predominately male authors in the canon show us the female character and relations between the sexes in a way that both reflects and contributes to sexist ideology — an aspect of these classic works about which the critical tradition remained silent for generations. The feminist challenge, although intrinsically (and, to my mind, refreshingly) polemical, has not been simply a reiterated attack, but a series of suggested alternatives to the male-dominated membership and attitudes of the accepted canon. In this essay, I propose to examine these feminist alternatives, assess their impact on the standard canon, and propose some directions for further work. Although my emphasis in each section is on the substance of the challenge, the underlying polemic is, I believe, abundantly clear.

THE PRESENCE OF CANONIZED FOREFATHERS (BURKE, 1790)

Start with the Great Books, the traditional desert-island ones, the foundation of courses in the Western humanistic tradition. No women authors, of course, at all, but within the works thus canonized, certain monumental female images: Helen, Penelope, and Clytemnestra, Beatrice and the Dark Lady of the Sonnets, Bérénice, Cunégonde, and Margarete. The list of interesting female characters is enlarged if we shift to the Survey of English Literature and its classic texts; here, moreover, there is the possible inclusion of a female author or even several, at least as the course's implicit "historical background" ticks through and past the Industrial Revolution. It is a possibility that is not always honored in the observance. "Beowulf to Virginia Woolf" is a pleasant enough joke, but though lots of surveys begin with the Anglo-Saxon epic, not all that many conclude with Mrs. Dalloway. Even in the nineteenth century, the pace and the necessity of mass omissions may mean leaving out Austen, one of the Brontës, or Eliot. The analogous overview of American literary masterpieces, despite the relative brevity and modernity of the period considered, is likely to yield a similarly all-male pantheon; Emily Dickinson may be admitted — but not necessarily — and no one else even comes close.

Here again, the male-authored canon contributes to the body of information, stereotype, inference, and surmise about the female sex that is generally in the culture.

Once this state of affairs has been exposed, there are two possible approaches for feminist criticism. It can emphasize alternative readings of the tradition, readings that reinterpret women's character, motivations, and actions and that identify and challenge sexist ideology. Or it can concentrate on gaining admission to the canon for literature by women writers. Both sorts of work are being pursued, although, to the extent that feminist criticism has defined itself as a subfield of literary studies — as distinguished from an approach or method — it has tended to concentrate on writing by women.

In fact, however, the current wave of feminist theory began as criticism of certain key texts, both literary and paraliterary, in the dominant culture. Kate Millett, Eva Figes, Elizabeth Janeway, Germaine Greer, and Carolyn Heilbrun all use the techniques of essentially literary analysis on the social forms and forces surrounding those texts. The texts themselves may be regarded as "canonical" in the sense that all have had significant impact on the culture as a whole, although the target being addressed is not literature or its canon.

In criticism that is more strictly literary in its scope, much attention has been concentrated on male writers in the American tradition. Books like Annette Kolodny's The Lay of the Land and Judith Fetterley's The Resisting
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WE ACKNOWLEDGE IT CANONLIKE, BUT NOT CANONICALL.
(BISHOP BARLOW, 1601)

Many feminist critics reject the method of case-by-case demonstration. The wholesale consignment of women’s concerns and productions to a grim area bounded by triviality and obscurity cannot be compensated for by tokenism. True equity can be attained, they argue, only by opening up the canon to a much larger number of female voices. This is an endeavor that eventually brings basic aesthetic questions to the fore.

Initially, however, the demand for wider representation of female authors is substantiated by an extraordinary effort of intellectual reappraisal. The emergence of feminist literary study has been characterized, at the base, by scholarship devoted to the discovery, republication, and reappraisal of “lost” or undervalued writers and their work. From Rebecca Harding Davis and Kate Chopin through Zora Neale Hurston and Mina Loy to Meridel LeSueur and Rebecca West, reputations have been reborn or remade and a female countercanon has come into being, out of components that were largely unavailable even a dozen years ago.

In addition to constituting a feminist alternative to the male-dominated tradition, these authors also have a claim to representation in “the” canon. From this perspective, the work of recovery itself makes one sort of prima facie case, giving the lie to the assumption, where it has existed, that aside from a few names that are household words — differentially appreciated, but certainly well known — there simply has not been much serious literature by women. Before any aesthetic arguments have been advanced either for or against the admission of such works to the general canon, the new literary scholarship on women has demonstrated that the pool of potential applicants is far larger than anyone has hitherto suspected.
WILL AUGUSTINE, IF HE HELD ALL THE BOOKS TO HAVE AN EQUAL RIGHT TO CANONICITY . . . HAVE PREFERRED SOME TO OTHERS? (W. FITZGERALD, TRANS. WHITAKER, 1849)

But the aesthetic issues cannot be forestalled for very long. We need to understand whether the claim is being made that many of the newly recovered or validated texts by women meet existing criteria or, on the other hand, that those criteria themselves intrinsically exclude or tend to exclude women and hence should be modified or replaced. If this polarity is not, in fact, applicable to the process, what are the grounds for presenting a large number of new female candidates for (as it were) canonization?

The problem is epitomized in Nina Baym’s introduction to her study of American women’s fiction between 1820 and 1870:

Reexamination of this fiction may well show it to lack the esthetic, intellectual, and moral complexity and artistry that we demand of great literature. I confess frankly that, although I have found much to interest me in these books, I have not unearthed a forgotten Jane Austen or George Eliot or hit upon the one novel that I would propose to set alongside The Scarlet Letter. Yet I cannot avoid the belief that “purely” literary criteria, as they have been employed to identify the best American works, have inevitably had a bias in favor of things male — in favor of, say, a whaling ship, rather than a sewing circle as a symbol of the human community . . . . While not claiming any literary greatness for any of the novels . . . . in this study, I would like at least to begin to correct such a bias by taking their content seriously. And it is time, perhaps — though this task lies outside my scope here — to reexamine the grounds upon which certain hallowed American classics have been called great.¹

Now, if students of literature may be allowed to confess to one Great Unreadable among the Great Books, my own bête noire has always been the white whale; I have always felt I was missing something in Moby-Dick that is clearly there for many readers and that is there for me when I read, say, Aeschylus or Austen. So I find Baym’s strictures congenial, at first reading. Yet the contradictory nature of the position is also evident on the face of it. Am I or am I not being invited to construct a (feminist) aesthetic rationale for my impatience with Moby-Dick? Do Baym and the current of thought she represents accept “esthetic, intellectual, and moral complexity and artistry” as the grounds of greatness, or are they challenging those values as well?

As Myra Jehlen points out most lucidly, this attractive position will not bear close analysis: “[Baym] is having it both ways, admitting the artistic limitations of the women’s fiction . . . and at the same time denying the validity of the rulers that measure these limitations, disclaiming any ambition to reorder the literary canon and, on second thought, challenging the canon after all, or rather challenging not the canon itself but the grounds for its selection.”¹² Jehlen understates the case, however, in calling the duality a paradox, which is, after all, an intentionally created and essentially rhetorical phenomenon. What is involved here is more like the agony of feminist criti-

cism, for it is the champions of women’s literature who are torn between defending the quality of their discoveries and radically redefining literary quality itself.

Those who are concerned with the canon as a pragmatic instrument rather than a powerful abstraction — the compilers of more equitable anthologies or course syllabi, for example — have opted for an uneasy compromise. The literature by women that they seek — as well as that by members of excluded racial and ethnic groups and by working people in general — conforms as closely as possible to the traditional canons of taste and judgment. Not that it reads like such literature as far as content and viewpoint are concerned, but the same words about artistic intent and achievement may be applied without absurdity. At the same time, the rationale for a new syllabus or anthology relies on a very different criterion: that of truth to the culture being represented, the whole culture and not the creation of an almost entirely male white elite. Again, no one seems to be proposing — aloud — the elimination of Moby-Dick or The Scarlet Letter, just squeezing them over somewhat to make room for another literary reality, which, joined with the existing canon, will come closer to telling the (poetic) truth.

The effect is pluralist, at best, and the epistemological assumptions underlying the search for a more fully representative literature are strictly empiricist: By including the perspective of women (who are, after all, half-the-population), we will know more about the culture as it actually was. No one suggests that there might be something in this literature itself that challenges the values and even the validity of the previously all-male tradition. There is no reason why the canon need speak with one voice or as one man on the fundamental questions of human experience. Indeed, even as an elite white male voice, it can hardly be said to do so. Yet a commentator like Baym has only to say “it is time, perhaps . . . to reexamine the grounds,” while not proceeding to do so, for feminists to be accused of wishing to throw out the entire received culture. The argument could be more usefully joined, perhaps, if there were a current within feminist criticism that went beyond insistence on representation to consideration of precisely how inclusion of women’s writing alters our view of the tradition. Or even one that suggested some radical surgery on the list of male authors usually represented.

After all, when we turn from the construction of pantheons, which have no prescribed number of places, to the construction of course syllabi, then something does have to be eliminated each time something else is added, and here ideologies, aesthetic and extra-aesthetic, do necessarily come into play. Is the canon and hence the syllabus based on it to be regarded as the compendium of excellence or as the record of cultural history? For there comes a point when the proponent of making the canon recognize the achievement of both sexes has to put up or shut up; either a given woman writer is good enough to replace some male writer on the prescribed reading list or she is not. If she is not, then either she should replace him anyway, in the name of telling the truth about the culture, or she should not, in the (unexamined) name of excellence. This is the debate that will have to be engaged and that
has so far been broached only in the most “inclusionary” of terms. It is ironic
that in American literature, where attacks on the male tradition have been
most bitter and the reclamation of women writers so spectacular, the appeal
has still been only to pluralism, generosity, and guilt. It is populism without
the politics of populism.

TO CANONIZE YOUR OWNE WRITERS (POLIMANTERIA, 1595)

Although I referred earlier to a feminist countercanon, it is only in certain
rather restricted contexts that literature by women has in fact been explicitly
placed “counter” to the dominant canon. Generally speaking, feminist schol­
ars have been more concerned with establishing the existence, power, and
significance of a specifically female tradition. Such a possibility is adum­
brated in the title of Patricia Meyer Spacks’s The Female Imagination; however,
this book’s overview of selected themes and stages in the female life-cycle as
treated by some women writers neither broaches nor (obviously) suggests an
answer to the question whether there is a female imagination and what char­
acterizes it.13

Somewhat earlier, in her anthology of British and American women
poets, Louise Bernikow had made a more positive assertion of a continuity
and connection subsisting among them.14 She leaves it to the poems, how­
ever, to forge their own links, and, in a collection that boldly and incisively
crosses boundaries between published and unpublished writing, literary and
anonymous authorship, “high” art, folk art, and music, it is not easy for the
reader to identify what the editor believes it is that makes women’s poetry
specifically “women’s.”

Ellen Moers centers her argument for a (transhistorical) female tradition
upon the concept of “heroism,” a quality shared by women writers over
time with the female characters they created.15 Moers also points out another
kind of continuity, documenting the way that women writers have read, com­
mented on, and been influenced by the writings of other women who were
their predecessors or contemporaries. There is also an unacknowledged con­
tinuity between the writer and her female reader. Elaine Showalter conceives
the female tradition, embodied particularly in the domestic and sensational
fiction of the nineteenth century, as being carried out through a kind of sub­
versive conspiracy between author and audience.16 Showalter is at her best in
discussing this minor “women’s fiction.” Indeed, without ever making a case
for popular genres as serious literature, she bases her arguments about a tra­
dition more solidly on them than on acknowledged major figures like
Virginia Woolf. By contrast, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar focus almost
exclusively on key literary figures, bringing women writers and their subjects
together through the theme of perceived female aberration — in the act of lit­
erary creation itself, as well as in the behavior of the created persons or
personae.17

Moers’s vision of a continuity based on “heroism” finds an echo in later
feminist criticism that posits a discrete, perhaps even autonomous “women’s
culture.” The idea of such a culture has been developed by social historians
studying the “homosocial” world of nineteenth-century women.18 It is a view
that underlies, for example, Nina Auerbach’s study of relationships among
women in selected novels, where strong, supportive ties among mothers,
dughters, sisters, and female friends not only constitute the real history in
which certain women are conceived as living but function as a normative
element as well.19 That is, fiction in which positive relations subsist to nour­
ish the heroine comes off much better, from Auerbach’s point of view, than
fiction in which such relations do not exist.

In contrast, Judith Lowder Newton sees the heroines of women’s fiction
as active, rather than passive, precisely because they do live in a man’s world,
not an autonomous female one.20 Defining their power as “ability” rather
than “control,” she perceives “both a preoccupation with power and subtle
power strategies” being exercised by the women in novels by Fanny Burney,
Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot. Understood in this way, the
female tradition, whether or not it in fact reflects and fosters a “culture” of its
own, provides an alternative complex of possibilities for women, to be set
beside the pits and pedestals offered by all too much of the Great Tradition.

CANONIZE SUCH A MULTIFARIOUS GENEALOGIE OF COMMENTS.
(NASHE, 1593)

Historians like Smith-Rosenberg and Cott are careful to specify that their
generalizations extend only to white middle- and upper-class women of the
nineteenth century. Although literary scholars are equally scrupulous about
the national and temporal boundaries of their subject, they tend to use the
gender term comprehensively. In this way, conclusions about “women’s fic­
tion” or “female consciousness” have been drawn or jumped to from consid­
ering a body of work whose authors are all white and comparatively
privileged. Of the critical studies I have mentioned, only Bernikow’s anthol­
ogy, The World Split Open, brings labor songs, black women’s blues lyrics, and
anonymous ballads into conjunction with poems that were written for publ­
ication by professional writers, both black and white. The other books, which
build an extensive case for a female tradition that Bernikow only suggests,
delineate their subject in such a way as to exclude not only black and work­
class authors but any notion that race and class might be relevant cate­
gories in the definition and apprehension of “women’s literature.” Similarly,
even for discussions of writers who were known to be lesbians, this aspect of
the female tradition often remains unacknowledged; worse yet, some of the
books that develop the idea of a female tradition are openly homophobic,
employing the word “lesbian” only pejoratively.21

Black and lesbian scholars, however, have directed much less energy to
polemics against the feminist “mainstream” than to concrete, positive work
on the literature itself. Recovery and reinterpretation of a wealth of unknown
or undervalued texts has suggested the existence of both a black women’s tra­
dition and a lesbian tradition. In a clear parallel with the relationship between
women's literature in general and the male-dominated tradition, both are by
definition part of women's literature, but they are also distinct from and inde­
pendent of it.

There are important differences, however, between these two traditions
and the critical effort surrounding them. Black feminist criticism has the task
of demonstrating that, in the face of all the obstacles a racist and sexist soci­
ety has been able to erect, there is a continuity of black women who have written
and written well. It is a matter of gaining recognition for the quality of the
writing itself and respect for its principal subject, the lives and consciousness
of black women. Black women's literature is also an element of black litera­
ture as a whole, where the recognized voices have usually been male. A triple
imperative is therefore at work: establishing a discrete and significant black
female tradition, then situating it within black literature and (along with the
rest of that literature) within the common American literary heritage. So far,
unfortunately, each step toward integration has met with continuing exclu­
sion. A black women's tradition has been recovered and revaluated chiefly
through the efforts of black feminist scholars. Only some of that work has
been accepted as part of either a racially mixed women's literature or a two­
sex black literature. As for the gatekeepers of American literature in general,
how many of them are willing to swing open the portals even for Zora Neale
Hurston or Paule Marshall? How many have heard of them?

The issue of "inclusion," moreover, brings up the questions that echo
those raised by opening the male-dominated canon to women. How do gen­
eralizations about women's literature "as a whole" change when the work of
black women is not merely added to but fully incorporated into that tradition?
How does our sense of black literary history change? And what implic­
tions do these changes have for reconsideration of the American canon?

Whereas many white literary scholars continue to behave as if there were
no major black women writers, most are prepared to admit that certain well­
known white writers were lesbians for all or part of their lives. The problem
is getting beyond a position that says either "so that's what was wrong with
her!" or, alternatively, "it doesn't matter who she slept with — we're talking
about literature." Much lesbian feminist criticism has addressed theoretical
questions about which literature is actually part of the lesbian tradition, all
writing by lesbians, for example, or all writing by women about women's
relations with one another. Questions of class and race enter here as well, both
in their own guise and in the by now familiar form of "aesthetic standards."
Who speaks for the lesbian community: the highly educated experimentalist
with an unearned income or the naturalistic working-class autobiographer?
Or are both the same kind of foremother, reflecting the community's range of
cultural identities and resistance?23

A CHEAPER WAY OF CANON-MAKING IN A CORNER
(BAXTER, 1639)

It is not only members of included social groups, however, who have chal­
lenged the fundamentally elite nature of the existing canon. "Elite" is a liter­
ary as well as a social category. It is possible to argue for taking all texts seri­
ously as texts without arguments based on social oppression or cultural
exclusion, and popular genres have therefore been studied as part of the
female literary tradition. Feminists are not in agreement as to whether
domestic and sentimental fiction, the female Gothic, the women's sensational
novel functioned as instruments of expression, repression, or subversion, but
they have successfully revived interest in the question as a legitimate cultural
issue.24 It is no longer automatically assumed that literature addressed to
the mass female audience is necessarily bad because it is sentimental, or for that
matter, sentimental because it is addressed to that audience. Feminist criti­
cism has examined without embarrassment an entire literature that was pre­
viously dismissed solely because it was popular with women and affirmed
standards and values associated with femininity. And proponents of the
"continuous tradition" and "women's culture" positions have insisted that
this material be placed beside women's "high" art as part of the articulated
and organic female tradition.

This point of view remains controversial within the orbit of women's
studies, but the real problems start when it comes into contact with the uni­
verse of canon formation. Permission may have been given the contemporary
critic to approach a wide range of texts, transcending and even ignoring the
traditional canon. But in a context where the ground of struggle — highly
contested, moreover — concerns Edith Wharton's advancement to somewhat
more major status, fundamental assumptions have changed very little. Can
Hawthorne's "d —d mob of scribbling women" really be invading the
realms so long sanctified by Hawthorne himself and his brother geniuses? Is
this what feminist criticism or even feminist cultural history means? Is it —
to apply some outmoded and deceptively simple categories — a good devel­
opment or a bad one? If these questions have not been raised, it is because
women's literature and the female tradition tend to be evoked as an
autonomous cultural experience, not impinging on the rest of literary history.

WISDOME UNDER A RAGGED COATE IS SELDOME CANONICALL.
(CROSSE, 1603)

Whether dealing with popular genres or high art, commentary on the female
tradition usually has been based on work that was published at some time
and was produced by professional writers. But feminist scholarship has also
pushed back the boundaries of literature in other directions, considering a
wide range of forms and styles in which women's writing — especially that
of women who did not perceive themselves as writers — appears. In this
way, women's letters, diaries, journals, autobiographies, oral histories, and
private poetry have come under critical scrutiny as evidence of women's con­
sciousness and expression.

Generally speaking, feminist criticism has been quite open to such mate­
rial, recognizing that the very conditions that gave many women the impetus
to write made it impossible for their culture to define them as writers. This
acceptance has expanded our sense of possible forms and voices, but it has not challenged our received sense of appropriate style. What it amounts to is that if a woman writing in isolation and with no public audience in view nonetheless has "good" — that is, canonical — models, we are impressed with the strength of her text when she applies what she has assimilated about writing to her own experiences as a woman. If, however, her literary models were chosen from the same popular literature that some critics are now beginning to recognize as part of the female tradition, then she has not got hold of an expressive instrument that empowers her.

At the Modern Language Association meeting in 1976, I included in my paper the entire two-page autobiography of a participant in the Summer Schools for Women Workers held at Bryn Mawr in the first decades of the century. It is a circumstantial narrative in which events from the melancholy to the melodramatic are accumulated in a serviceable, somewhat hackneyed style. The anonymous "Seamer on Men's Underwear" had a unique sense of herself both as an individual and as a member of the working class. But was she a writer? Part of the audience was as moved as I was by the narrative, but the majority was outraged at the piece's failure to meet the criteria — particularly, the "complexity" criteria — of good art.

When I developed my remarks for publication, I wrote about the problems of dealing with an author who is trying too hard to write elegantly, and attempted to make the case that clichés or sentimentality need not be signals of meretricious prose and that ultimately it is honest writing for which criticism should be looking. Nowadays, I would also address the question of the female tradition, the role of popular fiction within it, and the influence of that fiction on its audience. It seems to me that, if we accept the work of the professional "scribbling woman," we have also to accept its literary consequences, not drawing the line at the place where that literature may have been the force that enabled an otherwise inarticulate segment of the population to grasp a means of expression and communication.

Once again, the arena is the female tradition itself. If we are thinking in terms of canon formation, it is the alternative canon. Until the aesthetic arguments can be fully worked out in the feminist context, it will be impossible to argue, in the general marketplace of literary ideas, that the novels of Henry James ought to give place — a little place, even — to the diaries of his sister Alice. At this point, I suspect most of our male colleagues would consider such a request, even in the name of Alice James, much less the Seamer on Men's Underwear, little more than a form of "reverse discrimination" — a concept to which some of them are already overly attached. It is up to feminist scholars, when we determine that this is indeed the right course to pursue, to demonstrate that such an inclusion would constitute a genuinely affirmative action for all of us.

The development of feminist literary criticism and scholarship has already proceeded through a number of identifiable stages. Its pace is more reminiscent of the survey course than of the slow processes of canon formation and revision, and it has been more successful in defining and sticking to its own intellectual turf, the female countercanon, than in gaining general canonical recognition for Edith Wharton, Fanny Fern, or the female diarists of the Westward Expansion. In one sense, the more coherent our sense of the female tradition is, the stronger will be our eventual case. Yet the longer we wait, the more comfortable the women's literature ghetto — separate, apparently autonomous, and far from equal — may begin to feel.

At the same time, I believe the challenge cannot come only by means of the patent value of the work of women. We must pursue the questions certain of us have raised and retreated from as to the eternal verity of the received standards of greatness or even goodness. And, while not abandoning our newfound female tradition, we have to return to confrontation with "the" canon, examining it as a source of ideas, themes, motifs, and myths about the two sexes. The point in so doing is not to label and hence dismiss even the most sexist literary classics, but to enable all of us to apprehend them, finally, in all their human dimensions.

NOTES

1. Jane Marcus, "Gunpowder Treason and Plot," talk delivered at the School of Criticism and Theory, Northwestern University, colloquium "The Challenge of Feminist Criticism," November 1981. Seeking authority for the sort of creature a literary canon might be, I turned, like many another, to the Oxford English Dictionary. The tags that head up the several sections of this essay are a by-product of that effort rather than of any more exact and laborious scholarship.

2. In a survey of 50 introductory courses in American literature offered at 25 U.S. colleges and universities, Emily Dickinson's name appeared more often than that of any other woman writer 20 times. This frequency puts her in a fairly respectable twelfth place. Among the 61 most frequently taught authors, only 7 others are women; Edith Wharton and Kate Chopin are each mentioned 5 times, Sarah Orne Jewett and Anne Bradstreet 6 each, Flannery O'Connor 4 times, Willa Cather and Mary Wilkins Freeman each 3 times. The same list includes 5 black authors, all of them male. Responses from other institutions received too late for compilation only confirmed these findings. See Paul Lauter, "A Small Survey of Introductory Courses in American Literature," Women's Studies Quarterly 9 (Winter 1981): 12. In another study, 99 professors of English responded to a survey asking which works of American literature published since 1941 they thought should be considered classics and which books should be taught to college students. The work mentioned by the most respondents (59 citations) was Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man. No other work by a black appears among the top 20 that constitute the published list of results. Number 19, The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor, is the only work on this list by a woman. (Chronicle of Higher Education, September 29, 1982.) For British literature, the feminist claim is not that Austen, the Brontes, Eliot, and Woolf are habitually omitted, but rather that they are by no means always included in courses that, like the survey I taught at Columbia some years ago, had room for a single nineteenth-century novel. I know, however, of no systematic study of course offerings in this area more recent than Elaine Showalter's "Women in the Literary Curriculum," College English 32 (May 1971): 855–62.

