Resurrecting Literature Online

Joanne Leedom-Ackerman, Advisory Board Member of the Women Writers Project, is a novelist and short story writer and a Trustee of Brown University.

As a novelist, I spend large parts of my day roaming and discovering the world in imagination. Here the politics of the globe, the relationships of the home, the myths of the past, the wisdom of literature and philosophy, the curve of the sky, the angle of an ankle, the rhythm of words all come together and reveal themselves in story.

I am also a mother of two sons--now grown and off at college. During their childhood I spent endless hours telling them stories and making up stories with them. We imagined the world we couldn't see, behind the scenes of the world we did see. When my sons were nine and eleven, my husband and I moved to London, and on our first holiday we took the boys to Paris. There we visited the Museum and Hotel des Invalides. As we walked through room upon room filled with uniformed soldiers, scenes of battles, arms and armor from the 14th century to present day, I asked my sons, "Where are the women?" Granted this was a military museum, but it was also a rendition of the last 600 years of French history, and there were no women in any of the displays. "Women weren't soldiers, Mom!" they answered. "Yes, but don't you think they were somewhere in this history?" I was asking them again to consider the world behind the scenes of what they were seeing. Finally my youngest son shouted excitedly from one of the rooms, "Mom, Mom...I found a woman!" We all hurried next door, and there she was: a canteen carrier. Even Napoleon's horse and dog, now stuffed and on display, had secured a larger place in this history.

As my sons grew, we considered other stories on the periphery of what they were learning in school--such as in my oldest son's American literature course which covered the first half of the twentieth century without mentioning one woman writer. I recommended he should also read Katherine Anne Porter, Willa Cather, and Eudora Welty. The question continues to challenge: how valid is a view of history if it leaves out large portions of the population?

Answering this question is at the heart of Brown University's Women Writers Project, particularly Renaissance Women Online. Though most college English majors and novelists writing in English know the names of Daniel Defoe, Sir Walter Scott and Henry Fielding as the early pioneers of fiction, how many have heard of, let alone read, Margaret Cavendish and Aphra Behn? Yet these women wrote voluminously in the 17th century before Defoe, Scott or Fielding and were as well or better read than many of the male writers in their day. Even fewer students and writers know about Lady Mary Wroath, who had to "write for her life" when her husband and son died, and she was faced with financial ruin, or of Katherine Philips, who lamented that she had been published against her will and therefore had to face the ignominy that came to a woman who actually published her writing. In placing the work of these and dozens of pre-Victorian women online--over 100 works encoded to render the original text--the Women Writers Project and Renaissance Women Online is part of a larger effort to raise a literary Titanic from history's floor. The resurrection has been undertaken by scholars in America and England over the past two decades. Brown's encoding of the texts and offering of them online secures the work as it breaks through the surface and, one hopes, into the canons of English literature. It also offers this work not only to scholars and English literature students, but to novelists, poets and to anyone anywhere in the world who is connected to the internet.

I think immediately of a group of women I've come to learn about who spend their days outside their homes shrouded from head to foot in black, with only their faces, not even their hair, showing. They are from the first generation of women to grow up under the strict Islamic laws of the mullahs in Iran, yet they study English literature together behind closed doors. In particular they like the novels of Jane Austen for her "subversiveness" as she satirizes the strictures of her society. Though not allowed to display their feelings in public, these women write about their feelings and unveil themselves and communicate via the internet with each other and with an Iranian woman professor, who is currently teaching in the U.S. I wonder what they will think of Margaret Cavendish and Aphra Behn when they find them in Renaissance Women Online. I can't help but think they will share some of her spirit and defiance.

> For she loves writing more than Company
> But if it pleases not your Eyes or sight,
> She doth not care, since it pleas'd her to write;
> For she indeavours, tryes all that she may
> To please her self in every honest way;
> Wherefore a praise, or yet applause from you,
> She expects not, nor challenges as her due."
> --Prologue, The Aprocriphal Ladies
> Margaret Cavendish, 1662

In 1929 Virginia Woolf wrote:

> When a woman comes to write a novel, she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values--to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important. And, for that, of course, she will be criticized; for the critic of the opposite sex will be genuinely puzzled and surprised by an attempt to alter the correct 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.

As a novelist, I recommend the Brown Women Writers Project and Renaissance Women Online. The texts available open the doors to the past and to imaginations of the past not widely known. I recently pulled down my old Seventeenth Century Prose and Poetry anthology from my own college days several decades ago. Out of almost 1100 pages of text, there was one page on one woman writer, a single poem by Katherine Philips. These texts now available online allow us all--men and woman--to see from a different point of view what was happening behind the scenes of what we knew as 16th, 17th and 18th century English and American literature. It allows us a glimpse inside the imaginations of these women. The imagination afterall is the creator and the subverter and the ultimate "room of one's own," room women have sought refuge in for centuries, a room we can now also share on the Internet.