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A Vicious Circle: How Canon Continues to Reinforce Sex Segregation in Literature in the 21st century

This essay examines the role that the Western canon plays in perpetuating sex segregation in 21st century literature. Sexism in the literary canon has been considered problematic for a significant period of time, ever since many early feminist critics, such as Virginia Woolf, pointed to the unfair treatment of literary works written by women (95–96). Owing to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, this topic was extended to include many other minority groups, emphasizing the overrepresentation of white heterosexual men in the canon. The debates finally culminated in the canon wars in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g.: Thomson 125; Redfield 209–212; Purves 110–113; Robinson 38–48). Since then the situation of women in literature has improved, largely thanks to the endeavors of those who championed women's rights and gender equality. Nonetheless, it seems that the Western canon still encourages the belief that great literature is predominantly male, while female literature often is substandard and belongs in a sub-canon that is frequently depicted as inferior. Such a rift in the approach towards male and female authors stems from several issues that I will discuss in this essay, primarily connected with such questions as the purpose of canons and the process of canon formation. To provide some additional detail on the topic, I will also offer a historical glance at the situation of women within literature and provide present-day examples of dismissive approaches towards female literature. I will also comment on the claims that revisions of the canon are ultimately politically motivated.

I will attempt to illustrate my point that prejudice towards women's writing still exists by providing statistical data I have gathered from three sources. The first source is constituted by various lists purporting to identify "the best novels," "best works of fiction," or "novels everyone should read". These lists focus primarily either on works written in the late modern period (i.e. after the French Revolution) or in the 20th century and were published around the turn of the millennium. They fall into two categories: reader polls and expert rankings. The second source should be considered auxiliary to the previous one. By analyzing the statistics for female authors who have won the Pulitzer Prize in the 20th century, I attempt to gauge whether sexist attitudes were particularly prominent during any period of the century. Finally, I will also provide a survey of how male and female authors are categorized on the Wikipedia in order to determine whether the criticism of scholars and authors that the categorization is done in a discriminatory manner is merited.

The nominal purpose of any canon is to provide a selection of the best a given type or field of literature has to offer. This selection is arbitrary and often ideologically charged on the one hand; on the other, it is placed in a privileged position and often is approached with reverence, while denouncing the quality or position of canonical works is often seen as an act of iconoclasm. The canon essentially is a grand narrative dictating what “true” and “great” literature is and should be. The primary reason for the privileged position of the canon is the fact that it is established by authors, literary critics, reviewers, and scholars; in other words, people who have gathered a high amount of cultural capital, reproducing the divisions within society (Guillory 5–6). The canon also is a device that stimulates the publishing market, which in turn supports it in this capacity. This relation is illustrated by many lists that declare which “X novels you have to read before you die,” as well as by various ceremonies which award prizes and boost readership. However, it has to be stressed that literary canons do have a purpose and are useful. They inform readers of certain tendencies among those who establish them, and the times in which the canons were formed. They also emphasize certain traits characteristic of an era or a genre, and they often serve as shortcuts for readers, suggesting works considered exceptional.

Although canons are primarily created by those with cultural capital, it should be kept in mind that there are other factors that influence them, such as audiences. Many works were finally included into the canon only thanks to their long-lasting popularity, even if at first they were disparagingly dismissed as entertainment for the masses. However, their inclusion into the canon often has led to revisions in the canon itself. Changes in the approach towards “great literature” can also be motivated by other factors, such as new literary movements. This can be illustrated by Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick*, which was heavily criticized when it was originally published, to the point that, along with Melville’s next book, *Pierre*, it led some to question the author’s sanity (Delbanco 179). It was only when the grand narrative of modernism began to introduce new rules of what “great” literature is that Melville entered the canon, and *Moby Dick* became recognized as his *opus magnum*. Both these factors are crucial to the topic at hand. First of all, the long-standing popularity of some female authors was an important factor in securing their position in the canon, even before this topic was widely debated. Second of all, the changes in the canon in different literary periods allow us to recognize that the quality of literary works is context dependent at least in some degree. This creates ground for the reassessment of works once rejected as inferior, regardless if this was a result of their subject matters or the sex of the author. In this context, the canon wars can be seen as an attempt to redefine the white, heterosexual, male perspective that has been considered central to the canon.

Canons also play a hermeneutical role that can ensnare the author. They set readers’ expectations in relation to the topics that one’s works focus on, their style, form, and a multitude of other characteristics. This was what Mark Twain had in mind when he called the author “a manacled servant of the public” (qtd. in Lowry 120). The fear of losing one’s popularity or writing a book that will be dismissed by

the literary establishment and/or one's readers as inferior as it did not meet their expectations often serves to keep authors in check, entrapping them in a given style, similar topic matters, and discouraging them from experimentation. In the case of women authors, many have decided to conform to the expectations raised for female literature. However, not conforming to these expectations does not solve the problem as such writers still suffer from the prejudices surrounding women's writing and are arbitrarily categorized as "women's literature" only or primarily on the basis of their sex, without paying attention to the works themselves. The sex of the author, rather than the characteristics or qualities of one's writing, automatically assigns that person to a given canon. Furthermore, it is a canon that has been seen as inferior.

This approach goes back to the past. As Baym writes in relation to American literature, critics frequently adopted a stance that was dismissive of female authors, and manipulated the discourse of literary criticism in such a way as to prove that women do not write proper literature (128–130). Furthermore, Baym also notices the topics that women's literature focused on were deemed as not American in their nature, which was used to justify their absence in this specific canon. She also points out the fact that some critics saw the act of authorship as inherently masculine (137–138). This was not always the case, and as Tuchman and Fortin remind their readers, novel writing originally was seen as a primary feminine field that was considered neither a prestigious nor a proper profession. It only became seen as such after an increasing amount of men had begun to gain prominence in the late Victorian period ("Fame and Misfortune" 73–74; "Edging Women out" 310, 323–324). Tuchman and Fortin's study of the fame of English female authors in the 19th century, based on the *Dictionary of National Biography* and the *British Museum Catalogue*, established that entries about women were written in a different way than those about men. An entry for a female author would focus on such issues as the socioeconomic status of their family, represented by the father or the husband, and their social connections. Similar issues would be treated differently in connection with one's gender, and, for example, marriage was differently treated in the case of men and women writers ("Fame and Misfortune" 80–81). Female authors often would be treated in an unfair manner, e.g. the Brontë sisters were all listed and discussed under Charlotte. The late Victorian period divided the novel into two types: the popular novel and the art novel. The former was the predominant area in which women writers were active and was disparaged by the literary community as an element of mass culture. The latter, along with works of non-fiction, occupied a high position in this hierarchy. This distinction further marginalized women, as the art novel was inscribed into the aesthetic beliefs of the time which required a public school and Oxbridge education that was denied to women on an institutional level. Ironically, male authors associated with the popular novel, although not critically recognized at the time, such as Charles Dickens, managed to secure fame in later years, while many female artists of the period continued to be considered inferior. This follows suit with the idea that men come to dominate fields that previously were dominated by women, once these gain respectability ("Fame and Misfortune" 73–74). The position of women in the canon

is best illustrated by the differences in the names the DNB uses to categorize male and female authors. The former are labeled as “men of letters”, the latter as “minor women writers” (“Fame and Misfortune” 78).

From the present-day perspective, it is clear that increasingly more women authors, both historical as well as contemporary, have been included into the canon. Although the women’s movement definitely helped to alleviate the situation of female authors, the problem still exists, and women remain a minority within the canon. This can be illustrated with the example of the International Baccalaureate “Prescribed Literature in Translation List,” which consists of 1060 works: 823 (77.6%) have been written by men, 155 (14.6%) by women, and 82 (7.7%) have been written by anonymous writers, whose gender remains unknown. This is reproduced by various lists attempting to qualify “best novels,” effectively forming or influencing the canon.¹ For example, Amazon’s “100 Books to Read in a Lifetime” (R) also includes 29% of works written by women; similarly, the results of the BBC’s “The Big Read” (R) include 29% works by female authors. Interestingly, 14 of Jacqueline Wilson’s works were included; in popularity she was only overshadowed by Terry Pratchett, who had 15 books on the list. *The Telegraph’s* “100 Novels that Everyone Should Read” (?) had 20% of women writers, while Larry McCaffery’s “The 20th Century’s Greatest Hits: 100 English-Language Books of Fiction” (C) only had 12%. *The Guardian’s* “1000 Novels Everyone Must Read: The Definitive List” (C) was somewhat more open towards literature written by women (21.7%). *Le Monde’s* “100 Books of the Century” (C/R)² and the Bokklubben World Library (C) only include respectively 12% and 11% of books penned by women. *Modern Library’s* “100 Best Novels” is actually comprised of two lists: one prepared by a panel of literary scholars, authors, and critics; the other open to the public. This survey was controversial from the beginning owing to the low amount of female authors that made it to the list: works written by women constituted only 9% of the panel’s ranking and accounted for 15% of the readers’ list.

Harold Bloom’s *The Western Canon* includes a list of canonical works of “great aesthetic interest” (531).³ Bloom lists 666 authors in the latter two appendices, 72 of which are female (10.8%). This can be broken down further into writers of the “democratic age” (roughly from the French revolution to the late 19th century) and the “chaotic age” (roughly from the 1890s to the late 20th century). In the former,

1 In cases in which it is not directly stated, lists composed by critics and/or authors are marked as (C), and those that are the results of polls conducted among readers as (R). A lack of information on how the list was established will be marked with an (?). I have excluded lists focusing specifically on women’s writing, whose very existence shows the perceived incompatibility between women’s literature and the canon.

2 Critics created a preliminary list of 200 works, out of which readers chose the 100 that was finally published.

3 Since the book was published, Bloom has admitted that the list was originally suggested by his publisher, editor, and agents, and that he “did it off the top of [his] head” (Pearson). Nonetheless, Bloom allowed it to be included in that particular work and, as such, I believe that it may also be surveyed, although I will ignore the first two periods he provides (the theocratic and aristocratic ages) as they pertain to times before the advent of the novel, when very few women wrote, and thus taking these epochs into consideration would distort the final statistic.

159 authors are listed, out of which 14, or 8.8%, are women. In the latter period 507 authors are listed, including 58 women, or 11.4%. In terms of the number of works, Bloom lists 1192 titles, out of which 110 have been written by women. This accounts for 9.2%.

It is noteworthy that the lists that limited themselves to 20th-century literature had less female authors than those that approached literature in general. This was mainly because several illustrious women authors from the 19th century often had more than one of their works on such lists, particularly Jane Austen and George Eliot. The data also reveals that the lists composed by scholars, authors and literary critics, such as Bloom and MacCaffery, often include significantly fewer female authors than those lists that are based on the opinions of the reading public, which brings to mind Baym's and Guillory's criticism of the literary establishment. Furthermore, those that were included by the critics were mostly authors from the 19th century (apart from the two mentioned above, Charlotte and Emily Brontë were also common), which supports the argument that the continued popularity of certain works written by women, along with their long-standing relevance in the eyes of readers, finally led to their recognition by those establishing the canon. It is noteworthy that such expert panels often were criticized for being mostly male, and the female presence within them often seemed to be an example of tokenism (Allen).

Although women are not rejected from the literary canon *en bloc*, women's writing is still burdened by the general opinion that it is inferior. This notion can be illustrated by Jonathan Franzen's conflict with Oprah Winfrey. Franzen's highly praised 2001 novel, *The Corrections*, which received several prizes, including the National Book Award, was chosen by Winfrey for her book club. Winfrey's selection of literature includes popular authors as well as those that are canonical such as Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Joyce Carol Oates, John Steinbeck, Jeff Eugenides, and William Faulkner. She also included Cormac McCarthy's book *The Road* before it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. However, when she chose *The Corrections*, Franzen was quick to voice his dissatisfaction. He later elaborated on it in an interview with Terry Gross:

It was so unexpected that I was almost not surprised... because it literally had never once crossed my mind that this might be an Oprah pick, partly because she seldom chooses hardcovers, partly because she does choose a lot of female authors, and partly because as the reviewer in the *New York Times* said, this is too edgy to ever be an Oprah pick. [...] I'm actually at the point with this book that I worry... I had some hope of actually reaching a male audience, and I've heard more than one reader in signing lines now in book stores that said, "If I hadn't heard you, I would have been put off by the fact that it is an Oprah pick. I figure those books are for women and I would never touch it." Those are male readers speaking. So, I'm a little confused about the whole thing now.

Franzen's comments blatantly show the sexist bias against both female audiences and authors. Women's literature is implied to lack several qualities of male literature, particularly its "edginess," suggesting that books by and for women are conventional, timid, and bland. Franzen also relays the opinion of his readers who emphasize that

literature “for women” has nothing worthwhile to offer men in a manner that seems to condone this view. This also shows that the 19th century notion of categorizing women into genres considered inferior is still pertinent. In our times, this division is reinforced by using the label *chick lit*, which is often dismissed as lighthearted, focusing on themes stereotypically considered to be characteristic of women, although in reality they are practices common to both genders, such as the desire to find love, attempting to conform to modern standards of beauty, and indulging in such pastimes as shopping or socializing. Not only is chick lit denied artistic merit but it is also derided on the basis that its primary target audience is female, as can be seen in Franzen’s statement above. However, Laura Miller has noticed there is one more element at play in this situation, namely a certain elitism that tries to promote the view that quality and quantity are mutually exclusive. She writes:

The sad and petty truth is that far too many book lovers don’t really want a good book to reach a large audience because that would tarnish the aura of specialness they enjoy as connoisseurs of literary merit. I’m not just talking about egghead critics here, since there are just as many people who stand ready to condemn “hip and trendy” or “too clever” books they’ve never taken the trouble to read. Behind what a friend calls the “get him! syndrome” – that reflexive impulse to take pot shots at any author enjoying “too much” attention – lies the deeply unattractive tendency for book people to act like stingy trolls sitting atop a mound of treasure they don’t want to share. If they did, it would be a lot harder to use their reading habits as a way of feeling better than other people.

Although Miller’s article somewhat simplifies the situation, the tendency she describes is real and has been present throughout history, as Tuchman and Fortin’s article illustrates. The distinction between mass literature and high literature still exists, though it is changing. Franzen aside, many authors are no longer trying to completely cut themselves off from popular culture, drawing inspiration from its various elements and themes. However, this is not the case with the common approach to chick lit, which seems to be critically neglected because of its popularity. Furthermore, scrutinizing the issue, one notices that this neglect is motivated by sex segregation. Many male authors write fiction similar to chick lit in setting and structure, but some elements are exchanged for those that are traditionally seen as more masculine. Shopping for shoes may be replaced by shopping for records or comic books, while a social meeting accompanied by a bottle of wine and a romantic comedy turns into a few glasses of beer and a ball game. There have been attempts to codify a male counterpart to chick lit under such names as *lad lit* and *dick lit*, but they all failed. This is understandable taking into account the extremely broad and inconsistent spectrum of writers who were considered to represent such a genre. They included not only such authors as Nick Hornby, but also Dan Brown, Hunter S. Thompson, Ernest Hemingway, Chuck Palahniuk, and David Foster Wallace (Dick Lit Books).

The connection between women’s literature and pop culture remains problematic in other genres as well. It can be exemplified by publishers’ decisions to hide or stress the author’s gender or that of their target audience. An illustration of this can be found in the cases of J. K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter books, and Kelley

Armstrong, the author of the horror series *Women of the Otherworld*. The former was asked by her publisher to adopt a penname rather than use her given name in order to disguise her sex, as her publisher believed that “young boys might be wary of a book written by a woman” (jkkrowling.com), suggesting that male writing is seen as more universal than women’s writing. The case of Armstrong differs, as her sex was never hidden from the readers. However, this is a marketing decision, resulting from the fact that the subgenre of paranormal suspense (also known as urban fantasy) has been increasingly viewed as a female genre, a development also informed by the success of Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series. Highlighting such elements as the author’s gender or topics that are stereotypically seen as feminine is supposed to raise the interest of female readers. This can be seen on the covers of Armstrong’s books, which often feature young, attractive women. Armstrong herself has remained fairly diplomatic on the issue, although some interviews suggest that she is not keen on it:

The publishers handle cover art—getting the artist and choosing a design [...]. Covers are a marketing decision so they don’t necessarily want the author involved. We do weird things like expect the cover art to relate to the story <grin>. (*Success Circuit*)

The notion that paranormal suspense is a feminine genre in itself is problematic and illustrative of the main issue. Its accuracy was challenged by Carrie Vaughn, author of the Kitty Norville series, in an interview published in a special edition of *Fantasy Magazine* that focused on female authors in fantasy. Taking into account the amount of men who come to such events as signings and who are active commentators on her Facebook page, she estimates that around 45% of her readership actually is male (qtd. in Wickham). Along with Armstrong, she also notices that many view the subgenre in reductionist fashion, taking for granted that it is characterized by themes of romance and sex, even though they both state that these topics never are of primary importance for their books’ plots. In the same interview, Vaughn also takes note of male paranormal suspense authors, who adopt initials of their names to hide their sex from the audiences, further reinforcing the view that it is a female subgenre (qtd. in Wickham).

This problem is closely connected with the fact that such novels are mostly written by women and primarily targeted – though not necessarily by the authors themselves – at a female audience, which in turn reinforces the stereotype that these genres are essentially feminine. Men writing similar types fiction are often seen as representing literature of a somewhat better sort. This strongly suggests that the gender of the author, as well as that of his or her audience, plays a role in whether one will be dismissed as an author of popular literature or enshrined as an author of quality literature. This distinction, connected with the segmentation of the publishing market, is one of the factors that influences the way such authors are categorized in other sources, such as the Wikipedia. Female authors, including Joyce Carol Oates, Elaine Showalter, and, most importantly, Amanda Filipacchi, have strongly opposed the fact that the Wikipedia labels a vast majority of female authors as, e.g., “female novelists” and “female authors,” while male authors often simply are “novelists” and

“authors.” The issue was raised by Filipacchi in 2013, but not much has changed since then. My survey of 40 male and 40 female authors who had 15 or more categories assigned reveals that this tendency is still strong. Although the number of categories assigned to the men and women surveyed was similar (1108 to 1126), a person’s sex was only mentioned in 62 instances in the case of male authors (5.5%). In the case of women authors, it was stressed 220 times (19.5%). On average, male authors were assigned 1.55 categories which had the word “male” in them (median: 1), whereas women were assigned 5.5 categories that had the word “women” in them (median: 5). 12 men had no category with the word “male” assigned, 9 had 1, 12 had 2, 4 had 3, 1 had 4, 1 had 5, and 1 had 8. Three women had 3 categories with the word “women” assigned, 7 had 4 such categories, 12 had 5, 10 had 6, 5 had 7, 1 had 8 and 2 had 10.⁴

Nonetheless, it is clear that women managed to secure a respected position during some periods prior to the canon wars. Such was the situation at the beginning of the 20th century, when the successes of the women’s rights movement improved the lives of women. Women’s suffrage became more widespread, and they were regarded with increasingly more respect and seriousness, and the mundane problems women had to deal with, including health, reproductive rights and hygiene, were addressed more frequently. However, we can observe a distinct setback after World War II, which can be illustrated by the number of literary awards, most notably the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, that women received. In the 1920s and 1930s, 11 women won the award, and there were a number of female authors who were widely read and appreciated, such as Pearl Buck in the 1930s. It was only during the following decades, which were characterized by a strong conservative sentiment, augmented by the Cold War, that patriarchal sentiment gained the upper hand. In the years between 1940 and 1989, only 11 women won the Pulitzer for fiction. Since then, however, the amount of women winning the prize per decade has gradually been rising. Furthermore, the

4 Authors included in this survey were chosen based on their critical acclaim and popularity among readers. I have attempted to also include writers connected with various genres, such as the detective novel and science fiction. The lack of chick lit writers is connected to the fact that those most popular in the genre had less than 15 categories assigned (e.g. Jennifer Weiner and Meg Cabot). The authors taken into consideration were: Hannah Arendt, Kelley Armstrong, Margaret Atwood, Jane Austen, Pearl S. Buck, Elizabeth Bishop, Anne Brontë, Emily Brontë, Charlotte Brontë, A. S. Byatt, Pat Cadigan, Willa Cather, Kate Chopin, Kiran Desai, Hilda Doolittle, George Eliot, Gillian Flynn, Maxine Hong Kingston, Zora Neale Hurston, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Doris Lessing, Ursula Le Guin, Carson McCullers, Toni Morrison, Alice Munro, Joyce Carol Oates, Flannery O’Connor, Dorothy Parker, Sylvia Plath, Beatrix Potter, Adrienne Rich, J. K. Rowling, Zadie Smith, Amy Tan, James Tiptree Jr., Eudora Welty, Edith Wharton, Alice Walker, Virginia Woolf, Kingsley Amis, Sherwood Anderson, James Baldwin, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, L. Frank Baum, Samuel Beckett, Harold Bloom, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, William S. Burroughs, Truman Capote, Michael Chabon, Raymond Chandler, Don DeLillo, Philip K. Dick, Charles Dickens, John Dos Passos, T. S. Eliot, Ralph Ellison, James Ellroy, William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Jonathan Franzen, William Gibson, Allen Ginsberg, Dashiell Hammett, Ernest Hemingway, Frank Herbert, James Joyce, Jack Kerouac, Cormac McCarthy, Herman Melville, China Mielville, Frank O’Hara, Ezra Pound, Thomas Pynchon, Philip Roth, William Styron, Mark Twain, Kurt Vonnegut.

decision to inform the public of the shortlisted authors also emphasized the importance of female authors: 6 were listed as such in the 1980s, 8 in the 1990s, 10 in the 2000s.

Although the canon wars can be credited with some of these later developments, a part of their legacy remains a double-edged sword. Many see it, regardless of their own gender, as political in nature, which leads some to dismiss the majority of female authors in general, claiming that the inclusion of women into the canon is a result of favoritism under the guises of “feminism” and “political correctness”. This view nominally attacks not the sex of the author, but what is presented as merit. However, it often actually is the political outlook that can be found in one’s work. Such an opinion is much more common in the case of people with a conservative outlook, yet it is not exclusively limited to them. Such doubts are also recorded in Philip Roth’s *Exit Ghost*, where Amy Bellette recounts an exhibition about the most important authors of modern literature, during which she was angered by the lack of several white male authors such as Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner and, particularly, E. I. Lonoff, which she attributed to political correctness (175–176). This fragment of the novel does illustrate a point made by some prominent critics. The canon wars did not introduce political argumentation to the topic of canon formation, but they have made it a much more politicized issue.

The accusations of politicizing the canon are highlighted by Harold Bloom in his *The Western Canon*. In the book’s initial chapter, “An Elegy for the Canon,” Bloom connects what Roth calls political correctness with what he calls “the School of Resentment,” “the academic rabble that seeks to connect the study of literature with the quest for social change” (27–28) and that advocates the view that “what is called aesthetic value emanates from class struggle” (23). However, Bloom’s argumentation is problematic. He creates a binary opposition between literary criticism, which he labels “an art”, and cultural criticism, which he calls a “dismal science” (17). Bloom supports his reasoning by constant references to canonical authors such as Heine, Wilde, Hazlitt, Aristophanes, Emerson, Nietzsche, and Freud, in order to lay forward the claim that those contesting the canon are trying to “reduce the aesthetic to ideology, or at best to metaphysics” (18). Yet this entire argumentation relies primarily on the idea that the authors and critics he follows are impeccable in their judgment, and that their opinions and the quality of their work should not be questioned. His statements on the ideological roots of the “School of Resentment” are supposed to undermine this approach as partisan (17–18; 22–25), at the same time portraying himself as above politics. Thus Bloom ignores the political and social elements in the process of canon formation and obstinately claims that it relies solely on aesthetic value which he sees as a universal phenomenon of objective quality, rejecting cultural capital as a factor that plays a role in this process (37). However, such thinking can be undermined by such examples as that of Herman Melville and many other authors who only gained recognition after their death, as well as those who have fallen out of favor with the passage of time, such as Thomas Wolfe. Bloom, drawing on Alastair Fowler, makes a provision for such cases, claiming that such shifts of judgment are purely aesthetic (21–22), not political. Nonetheless, Bloom can be seen in this instance as an

illustration of how ideology is naturalized by those who subscribe to it: he claims to be a follower of “universal judgment” who is free from any ideology, while others are tainted by it (22–23). However, at the same time he denies this “universal judgment” even to those that represent the “aesthetic” side of the canon wars, like James Wood (Pearson), who once criticized Bloom as “[v]atic, repetitious, imprecisely reverential” (Wood). Ultimately Bloom, seeing himself as a modern-day Samuel Johnson, becomes what the *New York Times* once called him: a “self-appointed custodian of the literary canon” (Kirkpatrick). His argumentation is solipsist and dogmatic in its core, and it ultimately transpires that it is not the canon that he is defending, but his personal canon.

There is a difference in the tone of Roth’s and Bloom’s criticism. Bellette does not voice her opposition to the presence of Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, or Gertrude Stein in the canon. It is the absence of authors significant for her own generation, such as Lonoff and Faulkner, that she is appalled by (176). Bloom would most likely disagree with such a stance. He believes that the canon should be elitist and limited, mostly because he sees it as a list of books one should read in his or her lifetime. Making the claim that one’s life is too short for bad literature (32), he rejects adding authors he considers substandard, such as Adrienne Rich, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Alfred Tennyson, and Alice Walker (31; 35).⁵ In his eyes, the Western canon should be reserved for those authors who deserve immortality (39). What Bloom neglects is that his aesthetic judgment may be influenced by his own background: that of a white, privileged male. His criticism of the works of the authors mentioned above, particularly Walker, is very likely influenced by the fact that owing to his own social situation, he is incapable of relating to and appreciating such writing. As such, he dismisses such works as myopic political protests. Yet although there were some extreme voices from the side of the multiculturalists during the canon wars, as a whole they did not want to get rid of it on the ground of politics. They rather desired to include those who were denied their rightful place in it, owing to the one-sided politics of those who structure it, and protested against the institutional discrimination in canon formation, as illustrated in Baym’s essay that was cited earlier. Unfortunately, the tendency to dismiss such negotiations of the canon as mere political assaults on aesthetics survives. On the other hand, the fact that aesthetics is not universal does not mean that it is a useless or redundant concept. It is possible to qualify it, but such qualifications cannot rely only on the critic’s “superior sense of beauty.” There is a certain irony in what William Faulkner, an author Bloom considers one of the “three most vibrant American novelists of the Chaotic Age” (11), once said about taste in literature: “Maybe the only opinion to have about anybody is, ‘Do I like to read him or don’t I?’ And if I like to read him, he’s all right. If I don’t like to read him, then he may be all right for somebody else, but he ain’t my cup of tea.”

Despite the strong opposition to revisions of the canon, the situation of female authors has improved. However, there are still some issues that continue to be problematic. Women’s writing is still put at a disadvantage because of the opinion, often formed a priori, that female literature is inherently inferior. This often is supported by the view that such writing belongs to the domain of mass culture rather than

5 Out of these authors only Tennyson is included in the list of canonical works in the appendix.

high culture. Both of these notions have historical roots and have been sanctified in the view of those who form the canon owing to their cultural capital. However, the forces that form the canon have become more open towards the popular, taking it into account faster than before the canon wars. This allows for the quicker inclusion of women into the canon, though the tendency to ostensibly ascribe such situations to politics or sheer popularity rather than merit remains a problem and may lead to the relegation of some female authors into a sub-canon that, owing to the hermeneutical role canons intertextually play as grand narratives, creates and reinforces the vicious circle that may continue to minimize female impact on the Western canon of literature.

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Streszczenie

Błędne koło, czyli jak kanon literacki wymusza segregację płciową w literaturze XXI wieku

Artykuł omawia sposób, w jaki podział na literaturę męską i kobiecą jest podtrzymywany w kanonie literatury anglosaskiej w XXI w. Literatura kobieca jest nadal postrzegana jako gorsza i wtórna w stosunku do literatury pisanej przez mężczyzn i dla mężczyzn oraz powszechnie klasyfikowana jako literatura popularna. Artykuł podaje przykłady takiej redukcjonistycznej krytyki, dokonuje statystycznego przeglądu obecności kobiet na listach mających ustanawiać „najlepsze” powieści w historii bądź w XX wieku i analizuje częstotliwość kategoryzowania pisarzy w Wikipedii pod kątem płci.

Abstract

This article demonstrates how sex segregation is still present in the canon of Western literature in the 21st century. It draws on the historical roots of the belief that male literature is qualitatively better than female literature and analyzes the various ways in which this view is reproduced by the canon and canon formation itself. The argument is based on a statistical survey of several lists trying to present the “best novel” or “works of fiction” that were published around the turn of the millennium, both those prepared by readers as well as by critics and authors, and it takes note of the tendency of people from the literary establishment to neglect female authorship. A survey of how male and female authors are categorized on the Wikipedia is also included. The article then focuses on such problematic issues as dismissing works written by women as popular and the role the publishing industry plays in this practice.