LETTERS TO ALICE ON FIRST READING JANE AUSTEN

Fay Weldon. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985.

Anne Pilgrim

After only a dozen pages of this epistolary novel, Fay Weldon from behind the mask of "Aunt Fay" observes:

> *If I write too much at any one time the personal keeps intruding, and I am writing a letter of literary advice to a young lady, albeit a niece, on first reading Jane Austen, not a diatribe on the world's insensitivity to her aunt's various misfortunes, or the hard time women have at the hands of men...*

In fact, it is one of the attractions of this work that the literary-historical and the personal co-exist and blend throughout all sixteen letters to this imaginary Alice, and leave room as well for at least a minimal plot: the rebellious eighteen-year-old with green-streaked hair (it is her resistance to being forced to read Jane Austen in her college course that first provokes the letters) disdains all advice but still manages in the end to produce a novel of her own, entitled *The Wife's Revenge*. Weldon, the British author of such successful feminist novels as *The President's Child* and *The Fat Woman's Joke*, seems to have created in Alice a youthful alter ego.

Weldon's earlier services to Jane Austen's reputation include writing the television screen play for the BBC's adaptation of *Pride and Prejudice*; here she speaks on behalf not only of Jane Austen, and of all women novelists, but of literature itself. Aunt implores niece to read, to "fill your mind with the invented images of the past: the more the better." Energetically she argues the capacity of fiction to expand experience, to alter and make sense of the reader's life, and introduces as her central metaphor that of the City of Invention, whose districts and streets (Mannstrasse, Melville Ave., Galsworthy Close) Alice ought to be acquainted with before she can properly appreciate Jane Austen, or understand herself.

Besides addressing the broader issues of the value and function of fiction, the author does present much specific information, well laced with opinion, about Jane Austen's world and her literary work. Inviting Alice to consider the England of 200 years ago, she puts before her facts and figures on the economic, social and sexual lives of girls and women, emphasizing all the harsh realities noticeably left out of the novels. After a vivid account of the prevalence of venereal disease, the lack of contraception, and the fifty percent rate of infant mortality, Aunt Fay rather wryly tells her thoroughly modern, sexually active niece "So you must understand there were compensations to be found in virginity, in abstinence, in fidelity and in spinsterhood, which are not found today, and read Jane Austen bearing this in mind."

Though the research into the novels' historical background appears to have been conscientiously undertaken, Weldon is clearly by nature a novelist, more at home with what she can exercise her imagination upon than with what she can merely report. (Discovering at one point that she has mixed up her figures on the age of menarche, she candidly admits her preference: "Fiction is much safer than non-fiction. You can be accused of being boring, but seldom of being *wrong*.") Her discussions of Jane Austen's life and of the novels themselves reveal her happily speculating, theorizing and even inventing, in ways that may not always be convincing but that never fail to be provocative. She thinks that in girlhood Jane likely made a bad impession on suitors -- too clever and mocking -- but wonders later whether she didn't actively avoid marriage through fear of childbearing. Reading from the life into the novels, she looks for authorial self-portraits, finding a more likely one in Jane Fairfax than in the brilliant Elizabeth Bennet because the namesake character is "doomed to be misunderstood, and ever so slightly disliked." Later, she puts forward the notion that in *Mansfield Park* Jane Austen seems so determined to make Fanny Price a heroine because Fanny is herself -- the little girl sent away from home at a tender age who is dutiful and accepting, "finding her defence in wisdom." Her empathetic treatment of her subject intensifies as she speculates on what went into the actual writing of the novels; Weldon imagines the small round table in the parlour as the "ideal place and way for any writer to work;" believes the middle third of *Emma* drags because written while Jane Austen was depressed; is sure that Miss Bates is a real person who lived in the village of Chawton "because it is a slightly spiteful portrait and goes on too long: Jane Austen's revenge perhaps for hours of local boredom."

As must be clear by now, Weldon's criticism is not of the academic kind, which she assumes Alice is being exposed to in her course work, though she does speak occasionally of narrative technique, regretting especially that none of the major novels remained in the epistolary form, and she does repeatedly refer to the moral framework of the novels' plots. Even here, in observing that in the novels "it is the women who have moral struggles, rather than the men," she cannot resist adding tartly "This may, of course, be a reflection of life."

We learn much from these letters of the life of a modern novelist, one who must respond to questionnaires from graduate students, confer with agents and publishers, and give readings to audiences during book tours that range from Denmark to Australia. There is a sharp contrast evident between her experience and that of Jane Austen, whose "sense of an audience," while highly developed, arose from reading to intimate groups of family and friends.

Letters to Alice would be of value to beginning students of literature, to those interested especially in fiction, to lovers of Jane Austen's novels and to those who have yet to read one. Not the least of the book's functions (and one suspects this may have been in the author's mind) is to lead one on to discover the novels of Fay Weldon.

THE DEFIANT MUSE: FRENCH FEMINIST POEMS FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO THE PRESENT: A BILINGUAL ANTHOLOGY

Edited by Domna C. Stanton. New York: The Feminist Press, 1986.

Marie-France Silver

This anthology devoted to French-speaking women poets is the second in a four-volume series of feminist poetry (in Spanish, French, Italian, and German) planned by the Feminist Press. In each volume the poems appear both in their original language and in English translation, so that texts which might otherwise have remained unknown are made accessible to a wide public.

This volume contains poems by 37 francophone women, from the Middle Ages to the present. Many of them are well known, but others will be new to most readers. Commenting in her introduction on the criteria for her choice of poems, Domna Stanton, a professor of French and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan, makes clear its decidedly combative bias. "This volume began," she writes, "with the determination to exclude poems that privilege *Kinder, Kirche* and *Küchen*, extol conjugal bliss, passively bemoan seduction and abandonment and seek escape into transcendental saintliness or the beauty of flora and fauna." Thus, this collection is a deliberate repudiation of what has been considered for some time the standard book of French feminine poetry, Jeanine Moulin's *Huit siècles de poésie féminine* (first published by Seghers in 1963). Moulin (whose name, by the way, Stanton constantly misspells), finds the essence of feminine poetry in the very themes avoided here.

The selection here is purposely restricted to poems which, in Stanton's words, are "first and foremost a condemnation of the patriarchal institutions and attitudes that oppress women." Hence, this book excludes a number of great women poets, such as Louise Labé in the 16th century, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore in the 19th, and Anna de Noailles and Anne Hébert in the 20th. In that respect Moulin's *Huit siècles de poésie féminine* continues to be irreplaceable.

However, if we accept Prof. Stanton's purpose in making her selection, that is, to retain only poems which are "feminist in content," then we have to accept such deliberate omissions and admire the care, scholarship and talent reflected in the choice, presentation and translation of these works.*

From the pages of this volume an image emerges of strong, clever, erudite, passionate women: women wanting to be heard; women challenging male prejudices and institutions; women claiming their rights to education, to an intellectual and political life; women denouncing the bondage of marriage, maternity, and love; women screaming their hatred of men and of an unjust society; women singing the pleasures of wine or of erotic love, the joys of lesbian love.

One of the great merits of this volume is that it reveals an effort to create a female literary tradition and a desire to bring out the poetry in women. One is moved by the tenderness these poets manifest toward members of their own sex, as they celebrate the qualities, capacities, and accomplishments of women. And one seems to witness the emergence through the centuries of a sisterhood, which becomes evident in the 19th and 20th centuries with poets such as Bélot, Viven, Goll, Vannier, Calmis, etc.

The Defiant Muse is an important book of feminist literature. It focuses on poetry, a genre either overlooked by feminist scholarship or discussed only when it is written by contemporary American women. It brings forward, as Stanton says, "female poets from other places and ages [who] have remained unexplored, unknown, silenced like Homer's Penelope."

**The following poem, written by Andrée Chédid and translated into English by Mary Ann Caws, is a good example:*

FEMMES DE TOUS LES TEMPS

Ancestrales et pourtant fraternelles
Lointaines et pourtant proches

Elles viennent à notre rencontre
Ces Femmes d'un autre âge

Dans la pulpe éphémère de leurs corps
Dans la beauté d'un geste périssable
Dans les brefs remous d'un visage
neuf ou vieilli

Ces Femmes immémoriales
à travers argile et pierres
écartant les écorces du
temps
Se frayent un passage jusqu'ici.

Hors du tréfonds des siècles
délivrant l'esprit

Non plus *femmes-objets*
Mais objets devenus Femmes

Elles lèvent échos paroles
et questions d'aujourd'hui.

WOMEN OF ALL THE AGES

Ancestral and still fraternal
Distant and yet near

They come to greet us
These Women from another age

In the ephemeral flesh of their bodies
In the beauty of a gesture bound to
perish
In the brief swirls of a face new or
aged

These Immemorial Women
through clay and stones
parting the husks of time
Clear a path to the present.

From the subsoil of centuries
delivering the spirit

No longer *women-objects*
But objects become Women

They raise echoes words
and questions of today.