THE WHOLE DUTY OF WOMAN: FEMALE WRITERS IN SEVENTEENTH CENTURY ENGLAND

Angeline Goreau. New York: Doubleday, 1985.

Shelagh Wilkinson

If Angeline Goreau had written nothing after her definitive text on Aphra Behn her place in feminist scholarship would have been secure. With this new book she has extended the scope of her research to include the contemporaries of Aphra Behn; women who knew the playwright and her work and who watched her dramas performed. But above all, these are some of the women whose own writing was influenced by Aphra Behn and who gained courage from her example as a professional writer. For those of us who teach Women's Studies this is an important breakthrough. We will now be able to assign this new book rather than depending on xeroxed handouts – a hit and miss method at best but the only one we could hope for previously when attempting to include seventeenth century women writers in a course.

In the introduction to the book Goreau sets the historical context for the material she has gathered. She looks back briefly to the Renaissance and Tudor periods and assesses the relative ease with which a few aristocratic women gained access to knowledge. During the Elizabethan period, even with a Queen on the throne, Goreau describes the "falling off in the vogue for feminine erudition." She analyzes this process which continued in spite of a university (Oxford) that was embarking on "the most rapid expansion in its history" (1520-1620) and in spite of a system of education which included the founding of some eight hundred new grammar schools. Of course none of this comes as a surprise to the reader: the blatant double standard in education is endemic to the British system and there has been little or no attempt to alter the *status quo* – even into modern times, as Virginia Woolf reveals in so much of her writing. This educational barrier may be the overt cause for female silence, and many of the women writing in the seventeenth century recognize this. But Goreau's anthology reveals a much more pervasive threat which destroys the autonomy of woman: it is the constant modification of the self to fit the patriarchal paradigm of virtue and modesty which is the greatest controlling factor in keeping a woman away from her writing. This is Goreau's central thesis and her selection and organization of the material throughout the book keeps it in constant focus structurally and thematically.

In the first section, under the heading of "The Whole Duty of Woman," Goreau relies on male authors just sufficiently to make her point. She is careful not to belabour the historical fact of the misogynistic tradition that feminist researchers have already uncovered in much of the writing of this period. Instead Goreau inserts only a few excerpts from advice literature written by male authors for the "edification of the ladies."

Each of these men hold *modesty* to be woman's most important characteristic. In order for us to fully appreciate this "infinitely expanding architecture of (woman's) self-restraint" Goreau allows the women writers to explain their dilemma in their own words: "feminine modesty both confined our rarest and ripest wits to silence;. . . even so we acknowledge it our greatest ornament." By juxtaposing male and female authors Goreau lets the power of the patriarchal ideology speak for itself. And it was an ideology that was to gain momentum as the Protestant ethic spread during the seventeenth century. Many of the new sects enthusiastically encouraged women to preach; speaking in public leads naturally to writing for publication, which women did – in spite of the threat this posed to their 'virtue.' The attacks mounted against women were in direct proportion to their rate of publication and the scurrilous anti-woman diatribes that were churned out kept the penny broad-sheets in business.

The second section of Goreau's book "The Women's Sharpe Revenge"* records the women's responses to these attacks. The rage unleashed in the writing here is totally absent from the first chapter of the book, but is entirely predictable because these women are responding to sentiments such as those expressed by Joseph Swetnam; "It is said, that an old dog, and a hungry flea, bite sore; but, in my mind, a forward woman biteth more sorer: if thou go about to master a woman, hoping to bring her to humility, there is no way to make her good with stripes, except thou beat her to death. . ." (from *The Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Forward, and Unconstant Women* . . .1615). This book went through "ten editions before 1634 and it continued to be printed regularly until 1807." The public demand for this type of material fanned the polemical debate 'on women,' and the 'revenge' literature which dominates the second section is, at times, repetitive. But there are witty (and even some hilarious) excerpts that indicate women writers enjoyed using the power of the pen – even if they felt constrained to do so anonymously.

The chapter also includes tracts and essays written by women preachers and Mary Fell, one of these early feminist theologians, analyzes the scriptures from a radically new perspective. Goreau's note informs us that Fell was one of the few women who had the leisure time to *write* her rebuttal to the misogynistic attacks: she composed *Women's Speaking Justified* from her cell in prison. The final essay in this section is by Mary Astell and it is a gem. Once again Goreau's strength as an editor is obvious. She ignores the fact that the essay moves just beyond the century (1706) and she thus concludes the 'revenge' harangues with a lucid, well-reasoned essay. Astell's "Some Reflections Upon Marriage" is a perfect response to the material we have read in the first section. Moving beyond cant and hyperbole the author quietly demonstrates that hypocrisy and ignorance in marriage lead, inevitably, to misery – the whole duty of a woman is to no-one but herself. And Mary Astell takes her own advice; she never married but lived amongst a circle of 'blue-stocking' friends and by the end of her life had established a charity school for girls in Chelsea that "was to last until the end of the nineteenth century."

After the Astell essay the book moves into the final and largest section, "The Female Pen," establishing the beginning of a female tradition in writing that stretches right up to the present time. Goreau opens the chapter with the work of a Dutch woman, Anna Maria van Schurman, who had a tremendous impact on the women writing in the latter part of the seventeenth century. *The Learned Maid: or, Whether a Maid May Be a Good Scholar* (originally in Latin and translated in 1659) was the most influential book of the century concerning Women's Education. Van Schurman called for a thorough grounding in languages, followed by rigorous training in the sciences and in philosophy and theology. The importance of the book is obvious as other women acknowledge their debt to van Schurman. Bathusa Makin used the Dutch woman's ideas freely to write her own educational

treatise, corresponded with her mentor and, gaining courage from the encounter, went on to establish a very successful girl's grammar school in London.

What the writing throughout this section reveals is the growth of a community of women writers who gain support and strength from their number; while the constant call to 'modesty' is never completely silenced, most of these authors move beyond that.

The work of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, popularly known as 'Mad Madge,' is given the space it deserves (although one always wishes for more in an anthology of this kind). Margaret Cavendish was the first woman in England to publish a broad spectrum of work under her own name (some thirteen volumes of poetry, drama, philosophic and scientific observations in a fifteen-year span). She was obviously a woman who had a room of her own and the five hundred pounds to go with it. Margaret married wealth and made excellent use of it. Throughout her life she continued to advise women about the pitfalls in marriage: "a bad husband is far worse than no husband at all, and to have unnatural children is more unhappy than to have no children."

It is this sort of response to the "Whole Duty of Women" that makes this anthology such a treasure-trove. Goreau has brought together some fifty writers – women who are very aware of the societal strictures placed on them, yet who risk denunciation and ridicule in order to publish. And as the century progresses the female pen gets stronger; the women produce love poetry, odes, drama, essays and sermons. Their writing reflects the entire scope of knowledge that is now open to their inquiry. Goreau's remarks about Penelope Aubin, novelist, who is the last writer presented in the book, are telling: "her attitude to authorship seems far less caught up in the kind of guilt, anguish, or equivocation that earlier women writers manifested." This then is the process which this book traces, thematically and structurally. The writers presented here are quite clearly the foremothers of current feminist writing. The issues that preoccupy the seventeenth-century writers are basically those issues which Adrienne Rich and Tillie Olsen (among many others) analyze in their respective books on 'Motherhood' and *Silences*. With Angeline Goreau's latest book in hand the line across the centuries stands clear: the strength and comfort it affords are immeasurable.

**This is the title of a drama written by an anonymous woman (or women) in 1640.*

DAMES EMPLOYÉES: THE FEMINIZATION OF POSTAL WORK IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE

Susan Bachrach. The Institute for Research in History and the Haworth Press, Inc., 1984.

Cynthia A. Dent

Susan Bachrach's *Dames Employées* is a valuable addition to a growing literature on the history of women in the work place. Its subject is the feminization of the Postal Administration which became the largest employer of women in clerical jobs in nineteenth-century France. Bachrach emphasizes that this was a period of transition when women who had traditionally been employed, for the most part, as domestic servants or seamstresses in the garment industry, began to move into clerical jobs. Her study is solidly based on sources from departmental and Parisian archives, records of relevant Ministries, and contemporary periodicals and journals.

In answer to the question of why the numbers of women in the postal services increased significantly, Bachrach points to the importance of external factors such as the close connection between postal services and a rapidly expanding economy. This expansion was not accompanied by a change in attitudes about the traditional role of women in the home. On the contrary, attitudes towards women's work by administrators and politicians remained paternalistic. Thus positions for women were viewed as a kind of charity towards widows and single women without dowries which would solidify family ties. Women were not, therefore, considered as having equal rights with men in terms of job access, remuneration, and possibilities for advancement. For example, while women were accepted as managers of provincial post offices in the early nineteenth century, they were not to be found in major commercial centres or departmental capitals. By an ordinance of 1844 they were restricted to offices yielding less than 1000 francs, and were excluded from managing *bureaux composés* (offices which contained both a director and a salaried clerk) where they would oversee male clerks. Moreover, they were effectively prevented from advancing to the higher ranks by the segregation of male and female jobs, and they were not appointed as managers of urban post offices.

When women did enter the urban work force, they did so in response to a deliberate policy of feminization put in place to alleviate a combined budgetary crisis, and a concomitant advancement crisis for male clerks. Women, who could be hired for lower wages and prevented from rising in the ranks to compete with men, seemed to provide a solution to both problems. Nevertheless, to further reduce male fears of competition, women tended to be placed in telephone and telegraph services – which in France where run by the Postal Administration, not in the postal services themselves which remained dominated by men. The result was a tripling of the number of women in combined urban telephone and telegraph services between 1890 and 1898.

The feminization of urban postal work aroused tremendous opposition which was expressed in the major postal employee journals. Opposition from both the employees and the general public was reflected in the Chamber of Deputies which gave only limited support. The result was that the policy of feminization ended after 1890. It was not until the crisis of war in 1914-18 necessitated the replacement by women of men drafted into the army that the male-dominated bastion of urban postal services was breached.

Bachrach makes it clear that neither equality nor independence were to be gained by the increasing number of women who sought and received work in the Postal Administration of late nineteenth-century France. Yet there were advantages to be gained. For women of modest background and education, work as a *dame employée* or a *receveuse des postes* might provide a needed dowry, for even feminist postal workers believed that woman's most important role was as wife and mother. Postal work was also socially respectable. Furthermore, despite modest salaries and restricted opportunities, postal employees were not subject to seasonal unemployment or heavy manual labour. Nor were they forced to leave the service on getting married, as was the