

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-49525-7 - Women's Writing in English: Lorna Sage
Edited by Germaine Greer and Elaine Showalter
Frontmatter
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THE
CAMBRIDGE
GUIDE TO

WOMEN'S WRITING
IN ENGLISH

Front cover: Paula Rego: 'Prey' 1986

Since she began painting seriously in 1953, Paula Rego's work has proceeded to maturity through a series of remarkable transformations; the vividness of pre-feminine childhood experience burns through encounter after encounter with great art, with popular art, with fashion and fairy-story to create a women's realm beyond the confines of gender in the illimitable space of the imagination.

Germaine Greer

Two little girls are being stalked by a predator. In spite of their solidity and strength, they are the prey . . . Behind them a cat has caught a young bird. The predator, or the spectator, can pick up a mallet which is in the foreground, smash up the temple, and squash open the tender figs. *Paula Rego*

Paula Rego: 'Prey' © 1986, by kind permission of the artist.

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Lorna Sage

ADVISORY EDITORS

Germaine Greer
University of Warwick

Elaine Showalter
Princeton University



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Preface

This book's guiding assumption is that all writings have a place, a history and a character. From the beginning we decided that this should apply to the entries as well, and that, however brief, they should be attributed. My contributors have given the style in which the *Guide* describes women's writing in English over the centuries a special liveliness and concision. They themselves also convey something of the diversity of the contemporary scene. They include distinguished writers of fiction, poetry and drama, alongside writers at the beginnings of their careers, graduate researchers and well-known academic critics and scholars, freelancers of all kinds, and literary journalists. They are men as well as women, and of very different generations, too – almost seventy years separate my oldest contributor from my youngest. What they have in common is that their enthusiasm, and their pleasure as readers in the writers and writing they describe, persuaded them to put their information at the service of a work of reference.

The largest share of space has been given to entries on authors, followed by texts, followed by entries on kinds of writing, genres and sub-genres, general terms and large labels like 'postmodernism'. These last sketch out some of the projections employed in our maps of writing. The *Guide's* coverage reflects the spread of literacy, and the legacy of the ex-empire of English. In concentrating on women's writing, in fact, you stress the extent and pace of change, for the scale of women's access to literary life has reflected and accelerated democratic, diasporic pressures in the modern world. Nothing stays still, the past itself changes under the eye of the present, and competing paradigms of writing – what most counts and why – suggest how ambivalent we have become about any claim to common ground. Focus on 'modernism' and 'postmodernism' and you are likely to talk about textuality in terms of breaking the sequence, exilic experience, the arts and crafts of evading sexual, social, national definition. Focus on 'postcolonialism' and you put the gender and the geography back into the accounts rendered, you revisit identity. There are many Englishes in 'English', and one consequence of *that* is that the literatures of Canada, or Australia, or South Africa, or India have their own internal contemporary cultures, values, markets. Which means in turn that much of the writing that matters in those countries is not necessarily published elsewhere.

It was all the more important, then, that the *Guide's* contributors should come – intellectually and imaginatively, not always literally – from everywhere that there's a significant body of writing in English. This made a lot of difference to the choice of authors we eventually covered, and even more to the texts that are cross-referenced for most major figures, and many minor ones too. The canonical texts and set-books are here, but so are a whole range of less well-known works, from off the beaten track. One way to use this book is simply to read on past the person whose name you already knew and looked up, or the text whose title rang a bell, from what you can place to what you can't. You can start to do that on almost any page, and since the entries are arranged alphabetically, not by century or region, you'll find yourself in undiscovered country quite fast. The *Guide* is also a closet reading-list, and it's bigger on the inside than it looks from the outside. Readers travel. British novelist Iris Murdoch, who has died just as we are going to press, described in her first fiction *Under the Net* in 1954 the seduction of this – 'Starting a novel is like opening a door on a misty landscape, you can still see very little, but you can smell the earth and feel the wind blowing . . .' I hope we don't in the future settle exclusively for separate guides to American literature or Australian Literature or English Literature or Irish Literature. Excellent and comprehensive as they'll be, their boundaries won't have this permeability, this global projection that the history of the language has landed us with – where our differences are (paradoxical as it may sound) more readable than they are in more close-up focus.

We are divided by the dream of a common language: this applies to the anglophone world, but also, by symbolic extension, to women writers themselves. Works in translation – women's writings that have exerted incalculable influence across languages – are represented here, of course; and so are authors whose texts themselves stage dialogues between languages, like Chicano writers in the United States, Maori writers in New Zealand and Caribbean writers. And this is where you come to the edge of this book's world (which is after all flat, a projection on paper), and have to look for other maps, and other guides. Which is as it should be. For everything that's here, there's a great deal that's not: reference books may strive to be comprehensive and reliable, certainly this one has, but they can never be definitive, not only because we're not at the end of this history, but also because our picture of the past gets more and more populous. Here's just one example of who's not here: Anne Hunter. She was a late eighteenth-century London lady, wife of surgeon John Hunter, and the composer Haydn set several of her poems to music. She also wrote a libretto, which was not performed until 1993, for Haydn's *Creation*, based on Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Anne Hunter's text plays some suggestive games, punning on Eve's name ('The dewy Eve, the tempting fruit'), though on the whole she's as sweetly conformist as Milton might have wished: 'God view'd his works sublime / Which now complete were made / With

an approving eye . . .’ However, the story did not finish there, as we know. Such lost earlier writers, whose work helped create our world, can become once again part of the living record. We have no ready-made mythic connection with them (all daughters of Eve), but they are there to be rediscovered, re-read, reprinted. Anne Hunter is only just off the map: Fanny Burney was a guest at her musical parties, and the *Creation* libretto is in the Library of the Royal College of Surgeons of England.

Little by little, literature became a suitable profession for a woman during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. You can trace the nature of the social pressures involved by reading between the lines of many of the life-stories here. When a father or a husband died leaving no provision, when business ventures failed, or extravagance undermined the family finances, *then* decent women were allowed – allowed themselves – to write for a living. Otherwise, said Mary Brunton, whose novel *Self-Control* (published anonymously in 1811) seems to have influenced Jane Austen – well, a lady would as soon go in for rope-dancing. But they did, they did. In fact, rope-dancing isn’t a bad metaphor for the precarious business of supporting yourself by writing, even now. Although women writers’ life-stories take very different shapes these days, living by literature is no simple matter. For example – many of the women in these pages are teaching creative writing, in schools, colleges, prisons, all over the world; it’s a job that figures large in a surprising number of living writers’ careers, and something we take for granted. Is this a development that’s merely incidental to creative work and the inner processes of authorship? Or is it changing the relations between writers and readers, all of this passing-around of the role of author in workshops? Is writing becoming less of a solitary activity?

A *Guide* like this one can’t answer such questions, though it can map out the grounds for asking them. Writing about writing certainly became less lonely for me in the process of editing it. I’m grateful to my contributors for that, first of all. Also to the Advisory Editors Germaine Greer (who wrote the entry on Sappho) and Elaine Showalter (who wrote the entry on the *fin de siècle*). I asked them for help more often than advice, I’m afraid, and they were generous in providing it. And I owe particular thanks to Alison Stuart, Kate Webb, Lynda Thompson, Mary Ellen, Kate Sillence, Rupert Hodson and Jeanetta Pollok, all of whom helped to research the book, make sense of the materials, uncover gaps, cope with copy, and assemble the final text; and to my editor at Cambridge University Press, Caroline Bundy, who has seen the book through from beginning to end.

Lorna Sage

Note to the reader

Entries are listed in alphabetical word by word order. Mc is alphabetized as Mac and St as Saint. Names of authors, titles of books, movements, terms and so forth in headwords are in **bold** type. Titles or names in SMALL CAPITALS in the course of the text indicate that they have a separate entry elsewhere in the Guide.

A name or part of a given name which is unused is placed in round brackets: e.g. **Byatt**, **A(ntonio) S(usan)**, or **Stowe, Harriet (Elizabeth) Beecher**. Where a writer is known by more than one name or adopted a different name during her life, the alternative name appears in square brackets after the more familiar one, e.g. **Burney, Fanny [Frances]**, or **Wharton [née Jones]**, **Edith (Newbold)**.

To avoid making the prose stilted, text in small capitals may not correspond exactly with the headwords of the entries referred to – for example, the word BIOGRAPHER indicates a cross-reference to the entry for **biography**; the word CHILDREN signals an entry on **children's books**.