

In *A Serious Proposal* Astell criticizes the meagre and shallow opportunities women had for self-enlargement. She urges the establishment of a convent-like college for women who wanted to retire, in the long-term or the short-term, from a world centered on fashion and on men, to choose instead a woman-centered world of religious and intellectual study and good works. She writes this about her ideal community of women:

Happy retreat! which will be the introducing of you into such a Paradise as your Mother Eve forfeited, where you shall feast on Pleasures, that do not, like those of the World, disappoint your expectations, pall your Appetites... Here are no Serpents to deceive you, whilst you entertain yourselves in these delicious Gardens ...

Her women's college would also serve as a temporary refuge for young wealthy women besieged by "desiring men." Astell was passionate about female friendship, and she had a cadre of pious and learned women who were committed to charity work of various kinds. One project they worked on was to establish an actual school for women in London on the model Astell describes in her *A Serious Proposal*, but this was not successful.

Her *Reflections on Marriage* is a more complex document but one which must have struck a responsive chord in the early 18th century, for it was reprinted several times. Written in response to a well-known case of a husband's tyranny over his wife, Astell ranges in this polemic over the oppression of women within marriage, and criticizes the socialization of women which teaches them to have no options in life other than marriage.

Yet Astell is committed to the power of authority within Church and State. She

believes that when a woman marries — if and when she decides to marry — she must accept the authority of her husband, and exercise appropriate submission. Her essay combines unmistakable sarcasm toward marital tyrants with an argument about traditional sexual politics within marriage which makes the essay very disturbing to modern readers. Perry's discussion of this document helps us understand better the complexities around Astell's position.

Ruth Perry's biography of Mary Astell is the first book-length study since a Ph.D. thesis by Florence Smith in 1915. Once again, we see second wave feminism picking up on a topic which first wave feminism offered us, but which then had mainly antiquarian impact. Perry's biography is exemplary for several reasons. It is based on extensive archival work on Astell. Perry dug to excellent purpose into primary and secondary materials to put together her picture of Astell's life. We know more about Astell life than ever before. Perry also presents Astell not in idiosyncratic isolation but rather as a woman of her time, doing important work out of the vocabulary of her historical period. Many stories and many details help us work back into that time. For example, Perry gives us, in an appendix, a list of the hundreds of books in the collection of Lady Ann Coventry, one of Astell's friends, to show what kinds of books an independent learned woman with money would have in her personal library. Another noteworthy part of Perry's volume is the inclusion in yet another appendix of a manuscript collection of verse by Astell as a young woman, which lay unidentified and unpublished until Perry came upon it in the Bodleian Library in Oxford a few years ago. This is an exciting chapter in the historical recovery of women's writing. The poems help to fill

out the picture of the work and thought of an important feminist writer who chose various genres of writing — the religious tract, the political tract, the polemic, and poetry — as ways to direct her formidable voice.

Bridget Hill gives us samples of Astell's voice in her anthology the *First English Feminist*. She presents the full text of *Reflections on Marriage* and substantial extracts from *A Serious Proposal*. As well, she offers one religious tract in its entirety, and excerpts from several others. She includes a few poems too. In all, Hill's anthology gives us the main writings of Mary Astell in accessible form for classroom use and for general reading.

Ruth Perry's biography and Bridget Hill's anthology are part of the very lively arena of women's studies work on the 17th and 18th centuries. Writers on the 19th and 20th centuries have given us many riches concerning women's lives, history and literature. We are now seeing the lens of historical research turned back farther to earlier periods. With respect to Astell in particular, it is no longer possible to write the history of early feminism without reference to her. Nor is it possible to consider British writing of the late 17th century without reference to her. From now on, we can expect to have more revisionist work which enlarges our picture of women's writing in the 17th and 18th centuries. We can expect, moreover, to have new ways of writing the history of British literature and culture. Was there, in fact, an Enlightenment for women? And how will the history of the novel be revamped when we finally take into full account the amplitude of novels by women? In ten years, the history of late 18th century British literature may look very different as a result of feminist work on themes inside novels by women and on how women writers shaped their stories

THOMASINES OPRØR

Klaus P. Mortensen. Copenhagen: G.E.C. GAD., 1986

JOHANNE LUISE HEIBERG. KÆRLIGHEDENS STED-BARN

Bodil Wamberg. Copenhagen: G.E.C. GAD., 1987

Karin Sanders

Two new biographies have cast light on the 'backstage' of the official facade of the 19th century Danish cultural scene: Klaus P. Mortensen's book on one of Denmark's first great women writers, Thomasine Gyllembourg (1773-1856) and Bodil Wamberg's book on the legendary actress Johanne Luise Heiberg (1812-1890).

The fates of Thomasine Gyllembourg and Johanne Luise Heiberg were inextricably linked. Together with Thomasine's son and Johanne Luise's husband, the well known aesthete, philosopher and author, Johan Ludvig Heiberg (1791-1860), they formed a unique *menage à trois* that became an important focal point of the cultural life in Copenhagen. Their home became an example of the correct aesthetic, of 'good taste,' and served as a

distinguished and selective forum for a few chosen men: philosophers, authors and politicians. Here they would gather for 'reading parties' with the older Thomasine and the younger Johanne Luise as splendid centre pieces.

Behind this flawless facade, the lives of both women reveal passions and ambivalences that contradict the smooth surface of their official lives.

On September 11, 1801, Thomasine wrote a letter that she called *La Lettre remarquable*. In it she asked her husband Peter Andreas Heiberg (1758-1841) for a divorce. This request did not only shake the decorum of the bourgeoisie, but also had a decisive impact on her own personal growth.

The background for *La Lettre remarquable* was this: in 1790, seventeen year old Thomasine married her teacher, P.A. Heiberg, fifteen years her senior. One year later they had their only son, Johan Ludvig. Their marriage was not happy. Heiberg's conception of love was rationalistic and pragmatic; he saw duty as the ultimate goal in marriage and presumed his young bride would renounce her demand for passion once she became a mother. She, on the other hand, saw the love that physically and psychologically unites man and woman as the ultimate duty.

In a thorough reading of *La Lettre remarquable* and her subsequent correspondence, Mortensen shows how Thomasine gradually breaks through to a new identity, an understanding of herself as an individual. Heiberg's cool and rational relationship with his child-bride, and his reduction of Thomasine to her biological sex — carrier of his children — ignored her emotional needs.

In *La lettre remarquable* Thomasine appeals to Heiberg's ideals of freedom and equality; ideals for which he, shortly before the divorce-letter, had been exiled from Denmark. He, however, put up a bitter fight and though he ultimately granted her divorce, he denied her custody of their son. After the divorce she married her lover, the Swedish nobleman, Carl Fr. Gyllembourg, a man who nourished her passion and provided her with respect and understanding.

The rebellion in Thomasine's divorce was in a sense contradicted by her notions of gender-roles. Like Rousseau, she believed the proper role for woman was that

of caretaker in the home. The home, Thomasine, was a kind of physical extension of a woman's own being. It was through the aesthetic arrangements of everyday life that woman could express a cultural identity. The intimate sphere of the home provided not only a basis of identity, but a realm of power where female authority could reign.

At the age of 54, she started a major literary production, contradicting her affirmation of fixed gender-roles by transcending these same roles.

Her literary production originated as a help to her son, who needed material for his periodical. But the lust for writing, evident in *La Lettre remarquable* soon possessed Thomasine. She ended up producing a significant number of novels and short stories called *Everyday Stories*. Here she focused on the intimate relations within the family; the realm of feelings and aesthetic living — woman's realm. To conceal this 'unwomanly' act of taking pen in hand, it was necessary that she remain hidden behind different pen names. She only admitted to her authorship in a post mortem literary testament written for her son, and published after her death.

Writing then became an anonymous extension of her motherhood, but an extension of great importance.

Both biographies deal with the close relationship between Thomasine and her son Johan Ludvig Heiberg. At times their's assumed the flavour of a love relationship with jealousy from Thomasine and love poems from Johan Ludvig. Throughout her life Thomasine had a tight grip on her son and when he married the young Johanne Luise Patges, she immediately moved in with the newlyweds. The marriage between Johan Ludvig and Johanne Luise was largely arranged by Thomasine, and it is ironic that she, who herself had fought so hard to break out of a marriage with a much older man, paved the road so another child-bride, the 17 year old Johanne Luise, would marry her 41 year old son.

Who then was Johanne Luise Heiberg? Bodil Wamberg tries in her book to dig behind the masks that surround this legendary actress. In Johanne Luise Heiberg's own autobiography, published after her death, she consciously creates a legend of her husband and herself. It is a continuation of the stagings she so masterfully arranged in her roles as the Royal The-

atre's leading actress, and as the private, exclusive 'Fru Heiberg.'

The masquerade that Johanne Luise Heiberg's life was had its roots in her attempts to disassociate herself from her poor childhood. At an early age, her partly Jewish background gave her a sense of alienation from protestant Denmark. After her entrance into the Royal Theatre it became increasingly important for her to hang a thick curtain between her present and her past. This delimitation was refined after she became part of the exclusive household of 'The Heibergs.'

The relationship between Johanne Luise and her husband was not founded on eroticism. Their love was to a large degree fixed in a mutual understanding of the other's worth. They never had children — art became their common 'love-child.'

Bodil Wamberg sees in their relationship a Pygmalion configuration. They were necessary for each other: "He sought, as an artist, a critic, an aesthete, the unlimited potential in her. He was the creator, she the clay."

To a large degree, Johanne Luise depended on Johan Ludvig Heiberg and Thomasine Gyllembourg. They moulded her into a perfect image of the aesthetic formalism of the day, advocated in art and in the home. To sustain this mythical image that soon became part of her 'super-star' status, it was necessary to maintain a distance. J.L. Heiberg was a master in controlling this distance, and consequently isolating his young wife from the outside world. According to Bodil Wamberg, his efforts were two-sided. On one hand he wanted to create a shield around her. But on the other hand, she also had to be *seen*. This fine line between *seen* and *not seen* was relegated to the stage, where the limits were never transgressed, and in the home where only a chosen few were allowed a more private view of the living myth.

The isolation created a painful inner world for this otherwise passionate woman. The suffering was increased by the distressing dichotomy of nearness and distance between her and her husband: "When she, before their marriage, was distant and unattainable," writes Wamberg, "then he was present, then he loved her. Now, when she is present and demands the closeness he promised, he removes himself mentally from her." This

pattern of presence-in-distance and distance-in-presence eventually establishes a permanent longing in her that she called her "blue longings."

Although the suffering was an obstacle to Johanne Luise in her personal develop-

ment, it did, according to Wamberg, give nourishment to her talent as an actress. On stage pain could transform itself into passion and here her unsatisfied desire could assert itself behind the artist's mask.

Thomasine lived her passions in her ac-

tual life; Johanne Luise lived her passions in the world of illusion on the stage. Both life stories, full of contradictions and ambivalences, give an exciting insight into the complexity of the possibilities for women in 19th century Denmark.

WOMEN AS ELDERS: IMAGES, VISIONS, AND ISSUES

Edited by Marilyn J. Bell. New York:
Haworth Press, 1986.

Myra Rutherdale

Women as Elders is a valuable addition to a growing, but still very small, literature on aging women. This specially published edition of the journal *Women and Politics* (Summer, 1986), is a collection of eight articles which range in topic from images of older black women in Toni Morrison's novels and aging of religious sisters, to women business owners' retirement planning and health care for older women. In her introduction, editor Marilyn J. Bell, a sociologist who has focused her research on older women, observes that the articles selected for this symposium are "diverse, but they belong together." Bell notes the emphasis which each author places on the importance and urgency for women to face the future and plan for their later years. Women must confront issues of health care, economic security, and social support systems today so that we will be able to find a "supportive community in which to live rather than a 'cubicle' in retirement housing."

The authors all forward the idea that only women will be able to find solutions to the problems we face as an aging population. As such, this book is a call-to-arms for women to take a leading role in collectively shaping our retirement years. While reading *Women as Elders*, I was reminded of the epigraph Margaret Laurence selected for *The Stone Angel* from a Dylan Thomas poem: "Do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light." The papers included in this collection all make suggestions on how to face issues such as housing and health care for elderly women, and on how to create a new image of older women as "strong, wise and dignified" to replace the traditional 'grandmotherly' portrayal

which we are accustomed to seeing in the work of Norman Rockwell or on television. Yet the authors are by no means utopian dreamers. In fact, their visions are very realistic and attainable.

In her "Crones Nest: The Vision," Nancy Breeze lays out the hopes and aspirations of a project which is still in the planning phase. Breeze maintains that "at a time when increasing ageism and sexism work to ignore and devalue older women, it is essential to discover ways that women can remain healthy and independent for as long as possible." In St. Augustine, Florida a number of women are working together on the Crones Nest project, an alternative residential community where older heterosexual and lesbian women will be able to live in private quarters, but participate in running the home and other recreational activities, if they choose.

Similarly, in "Aging: Religious Sisters Facing The Future," Rita L. Margraff presents her vision for sisters who must prepare for retirement by securing adequate housing and health care. In the author's congregation, Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart, 73% percent of the women are over sixty, yet the majority of sisters have not arranged for retirement. Margraff argues that nuns must prepare to move away from their congregations into apartments or small houses and learn how to use their retirement and leisure time profitably by either taking other careers, like social work, or by becoming actively involved in community voluntary work until such time as their health demands that they return to their Motherhouses. One problem with this suggestion is that most nuns could not afford to live on their own. This is one of the major challenges which religious congregations must face, and soon: "Who is responsible for the woman religious? She herself? Her younger sisters? Professional administrators?"

Just as Margraff is very concerned about the future of aging sisters, so too does Jean M. Coyle express outrage at the fact that no empirical data has yet been gathered on retiring business women. In her article

"Retirement Planning and the Woman Business Owner," Coyle notes that this gap in social research is astounding — particularly when we consider that, according to the 1980 Census, of the 701,957 women who own businesses in the United States, 42% are over the age of 55. Coyle sets out directions for future research and boggles at the fact that society has so decidedly ignored the issue of retiring women business owners.

While some articles present visions of the future and suggest research directions, others concentrate on images of older women. In their article "Remembering Our Foremothers: Older Black Women, Politics of Age, Politics of Survival as Embodied in the Novels of Toni Morrison," Karla Holloway and Stephanie Demetrakopoulos explore images of older black women. This biracial collaboration (Holloway is a young black professor of English and Demetrakopoulos is a middle-age white professor of English) examines the portrayal of black women in Morrison's novels in terms of their African heritages and American experiences. Most importantly, this article points to cultural differences between black and white perceptions of the aging female. As the authors remark, "our essay shows how black women's feelings about being women must differ radically from white women's because black culture values the feminine and the aged so much more than white culture does." Holloway demonstrates how this tradition can be traced in Morrison's characters to their African heritage and how, in many ways, her women represent "feminist icons."

Like Holloway and Demetrakopoulos, psychologist Doris Hammond is concerned about the image of older women. In her article "Health Care For Older Women: Curing The Disease," Hammond argues convincingly that most older women "find themselves the victims of neglect and disrespect within the health care system, their complaints belittled, and their symptoms attributed to 'post menopausal syndrome,' old age, hy-