

Literary Women, Ellen Moers, Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1977, pp. 496, paperback \$4.75.

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Ellen Moers' *Literary Women* is a highly readable and stimulating discussion of major English, French and American women writers from the late eighteenth century to the present. Although Moers provides a fresh examination of the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti, and some incidental observations on the poetry of Sylvia Plath, Adrienne Rich and other modern poets, *Literary Women* is primarily concerned with women who established their literary reputations by writing works of fiction. This emphasis is not surprising since, as Moers occasionally reminds her readers, the rise of women to professional literary status is inseparable from the rise of the novel.

Literary Women will introduce almost everyone who reads it to a number of little-known women writers and to a wide variety of little-read poetic, dramatic, fictional and non-fictional works. A few of the women writers Moers mentions are not English, French or American; Frederika Bremer, for example, the Swedish feminist writer, is referred to several times. However, *Literary Women* will be especially valuable to novel readers who are familiar with the major English and American women novelists of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but not with the French writers who influenced them. Moers has many interesting things to say about the influence of Mme de Staël's *Corinne* on nineteenth century English and American novelists; about George Sand's influence on Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot; and about French and English women writers' responses to Rousseau, especially to Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Moers also discusses the importance of Mme de Genlis's pedagogical fictions to Jane Austen.

Literary Women is comprised of eleven chapters, independent essays some of which appeared in slightly different form in American periodicals. Much of chapter five, 'Female Gothic', for example, appeared in *The New York Review of Books* as an essay offering an original and suggestive interpretation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* as a birth myth, the product of Mary Shelley's own terrifying experience of maternity. Chapter four, 'Money, the Job, and Little Women: Female Realism', opens with a discussion of Jane Austen's interest in the economic realities of the marriage market, and goes on to look at what Moers considers a basically feminist consciousness of the importance of money in Mrs. Gore's *Pin-Money* (1831), Virginia Woolf's *The Years* and *Three Guineas* and Lillian Hellman's plays. In the second part of the chapter Moers suggests that evidence of a specifically female literary 'realism' appears in the keen interest in professional and domestic occupations to be seen in the works of Charlotte Brontë, Harriet Martineau, George Eliot, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Louisa May Alcott. In this part of the chapter Moers refers, along the way, to Florence Nightingale, Beatrice Potter, Jane Addams, Lydia Chukovskaya (a Russian novelist), and Simone Weil. A similarly impressive variety of women is to be found in every chapter of this book. It is this variety, together with the skill with which Moers handles the biographical, historical and critical materials she draws upon, that makes *Literary Women* such a valuable contribution to women's studies.

A chapter entitled 'Women's Literary Traditions and the Individual Talent' should be of interest to anyone concerned with the subject of women and the arts. Moers indicates the significance of the fact that women writers (as opposed, say, to women painters) have always had easy access to the works of their female contemporaries and predecessors by pointing out that, in contrast to male writers, 'women through most

of the nineteenth century were barred from the universities, isolated in their own homes, chaperoned in travel, painfully restricted in friendship. The personal give-and-take of the literary life was closed to them. Without it, they studied with a special closeness the works written by their own sex, and developed a sense of easy, almost rude familiarity with the women who wrote them.' Moers argues persuasively that literary critics have generally failed to assess the value to an individual woman writer of her relations with other writers of her sex. Critics have been particularly reluctant to recognize the supreme importance to Jane Austen of women writers of fiction. As Moers with characteristic humour puts it: 'Who wants to associate the great Jane Austen, companion of Shakespeare, with someone named Mary Brunton?' And yet, as Moers goes on to say, it was Mary Brunton's *Self Control* that Jane Austen was reading while revising *Sense and Sensibility* and starting *Mansfield Park*. Moers concludes her discussion of Jane Austen saying: 'The fact is that Austen studied Maria Edgeworth more attentively than Scott, and Fanny Burney more than Richardson; and she came closer to meeting Mme de Staël than she did to meeting any of the literary men of her age.'

Yet *Literary Women*, though it imaginatively points the way to a new understanding of women's literary traditions, occasionally fails to do anything more than point the way. In drawing attention to certain important aspects of George Eliot's relations with Harriet Beecher Stowe, for example, Moers neglects to say anything about George Eliot and Elizabeth Gaskell. And in developing an unusually strained hypothesis about the relationship between Austen's *Emma* and Eliot's *Adam Bede*, Moers overlooks entirely the obvious and obviously important relationship between *Emma* and *Daniel Deronda*.

These are, however, very minor shortcomings. Much more serious is *Literary Women*'s lack of theoretical clarity. With sublime naiveté Moers can at one point in her Preface state that her 'principal obligation' as a writer is 'to record without simplification what it has meant to be at once a woman and a writer', as though 'what it has meant' in any historical period to be either a woman or a writer is something that the historian can simply retrieve, as simple, uninterpretable fact. At another point, Moers suggests that what she is doing is interpreting unconscious processes; her task, she says, is 'to track the deep creative strategies of the literary mind at work upon the fact of female'. It is perhaps because Moers thinks that being female is somehow a 'fact' that the terms 'female', 'feminine' and 'feminist' are as she uses them virtually interchangeable. Reinforcing this conservative bias is *Literary Women*'s occasionally articulated assumption that its readers are not only comfortably but also complacently middle-class. Of George Sand's home, Nohant, Moers writes: 'Nohant was a messy household, full of laughter and games and theatricals and family arguments and good intellectual talk and tobacco smoke and music—just like yours and mine.' Consistent with this is Moers' tacit assumption that the women of the nineteenth century who became interested in or committed to various political causes were expressing in their interest or commitment an essentially private and personal sense of wrong. Moers speaks of Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna, a writer who influenced Mrs. Gaskell, as the 'type' of 'feminine outrage diverted to non-feminist social causes', the non-feminist cause diverting a woman being, in this case, industry's exploitation of its labourers. Moers implies that the 'wider issue of social class injustice in modern society' is knowable only accidentally, 'via a sense of personal injustice' which she calls 'feminine access'.

These are the only major deficiencies of a book that is written in a lively, unpretentious journalistic style. *Literary Women* is a book that should be read not only or even primarily by academic students of literature, but by everyone who has enjoyed reading literature written by women.