

## Editors' Introduction

This special issue of *Practitioners' Voices in Classical Reception Studies* is a collection of conversations with women writers conducted over a period of around twelve months as part of a research project on the significance of contemporary women's writing in the reception of classical myth and literature today.

It is worth starting with a few words on women's writing- a category that is under constant scrutiny as contemporary authors are often uncomfortable with the idea of gendered writing, or writing dominated by the agenda of gender or feminism. The history of this discomfort goes back to the 1970s and early 80s which saw a wave of scholarly and popular interest in women's writing, an interest which for many women writers and readers was immensely liberating. Many authors at the time, however, refused to be seen as 'women writers', found theoretical notions such as *écriture féminine* limiting in their essentialism, and were exasperated by the limitations of the category. From the mid-eighties onwards, post-structuralism's denial of the role of the author, along with Judith Butler's work on gender as performance contributed to the decline of academic interest in the idea of the woman writer.<sup>1</sup> A schism could be said to emerge at this point between theory and practice: theory, dominated by post-structuralism, denied the connection between authors and their texts – but feminist practice meant that women authors, still under-represented at the time in academic studies, in the major publishing houses, and in the press, had to be studied and written about. Today, women's writing is perhaps not as under-represented as it has been in the past. For instance, 2013 has seen the publication by the literary magazine *Granta* of a new list of the twenty most promising young British novelists under 40: the first list of this kind in 1983 included just five women- the 2013 list contains a majority of women for the first time. However, given this preponderance of women novelists it is interesting to note that statistics provided by VIDA, an online forum for women writers, show that in 2012 the *London Review of Books* reviewed 203 books by male authors and 74 books by female authors. In the same year, the *New York Review of Books* published 89 reviews of works by women authors, and 316 reviews of works by men [[www.vidaweb.org/the-count-2012](http://www.vidaweb.org/the-count-2012)]. Statistics are only a small part of this story – but they may go some way towards explaining why the Women's Prize for Fiction (formerly the Orange Prize) continues to play an important role. In academe, despite the caveats posed by post-structuralism and gender studies, programmes in English Literature and in Modern Languages offer courses on women's writing, both historical and contemporary; and a number of dedicated journals (e.g. *Contemporary Women's Writing*) are continuing to debate, define, and examine women's writing as a discrete field of literary studies. As a category, however, women's writing today, in the world of 'third-wave' feminism(s), is more unstable than ever- and hence perhaps more worthy of close examination than it has ever been.

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<sup>1</sup> On this, see Toril Moi, 'I am not a woman writer: About women, literature and feminist theory today', *Feminist Theory* Vol 9.3 (2008): 259-271.

When it comes to women's writing and classical reception, things have also changed a great deal since the 1970s, when the mood of revision and recuperation was perhaps best expressed in Adrienne Rich's famous 1971 essay 'When we dead awaken: writing as revision'. Thirty years later women poets, novelists, and playwrights dominate the practice of classical reception with unprecedented momentum. In the last two years alone we have seen Madeline Miller's *Song of Achilles* (2011) and Alice Oswald's *Memorial* (2011), while the poet laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, has poems about Achilles, Atlas, Echo, Leda, and Virgil's Bees in her most recent collection, *The Bees* (2011). Before this, a number of volumes in the Canongate series *The Myths* were by women authors engaging with classical material: in 2005, Jeanette Winterson's *Weight* and Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad*; in 2007 Ali Smith's *Girl meets Boy* and Salley Vickers's *Where Three Roads Meet*. The effect of this critical mass of women's creative responses to classical literature is that the 'classical tradition', as it used to be known, is no longer the exclusively masculine domain it once was. The dialogue with classical antiquity is now populated with women's readings and interpretations – and as a consequence contemporary culture is able to encounter a rather different version of classical literature. In the field of translation, too, women are more prominent than ever: Janet Lembke's *Georgics*, Sarah Ruden's *Aeneid* and *Oresteia*, Anne Carson's *Sappho and Euripides*, Josephine Balmer's *Catullus and Sappho*, are just a small sample of the significant body of female translations. We have discussed this topic at greater length in a recent special issue of *Classical Reception Studies*, devoted entirely to contemporary women's writing <http://crj.oxfordjournals.org/content/4/2.toc>. We note in our contributions to the special issue how striking it is that the extraordinary surge of women's contribution to classical reception has not met with proportionate scholarly attention (for instance, the many excellent collected volumes, companions, and guides in classical reception studies mention only a very small sample of works by women authors, while names such as Heaney, Walcott, and Hughes continue to dominate). By contrast with the fact that feminist theory and the study of women in antiquity have become a part of the mainstream of classical scholarship, the comparative lack of attention paid to women authors in classical reception studies is especially surprising. While Classics as an academic discipline has now opened its doors to non-male, non-elite voices and topics, including reception studies, and especially studies of 'popular' or 'low' culture, women's writing both as a category or field of studies, and as a body of literature, has not been part of this process of democratization.

The conversations in this volume bring together the voices of a variety of women authors: although the majority are Anglophone we have included two French and one German author; we have spoken to poets, playwrights, and novelists; we have spoken to authors who are trained Classicists (Alice Oswald, Marie Cosnay, Josephine Balmer, Jane Alison), and to authors (e.g. Tiffany Atkinson, Jo Shapcott) who have no knowledge of Classical languages at all, but work with translations. Among those who do have Latin or Greek or both, we were struck by how often the acquisition of Greek especially was not a matter of routine school learning: Elizabeth Cook and Barbara Köhler both learnt Greek as adults; Josephine

Balmer took it at a neighbouring boys' school; Alice Oswald, though an Oxford-trained classicist, was the only student in her A-level group. Gwyneth Lewis had a lunch-time Greek club that never came to anything. She reminds us that it is not only gender, but class, too, that plays a role here. Of course, these stories are not exactly equivalent to Virginia Woolf going to take her Greek lessons with Miss Janet Case – but still for a number of our authors access to the ancient language was not a matter of course or entitlement, and this matters to the way in which they engage with classical material. In 'Handbags and Gladrags: A Woman in Transgression, Reflecting' <http://crj.oxfordjournals.org/content/4/2/261.abstract>, Josephine Balmer reminds us of the famous quote about Fred Astaire ('Sure he was great, but don't forget Ginger Rogers did everything he did backwards ... and in high heels!'). The task of translating, rewriting, or re-imagining classical texts is not straightforward for any of the authors we spoke to- and their relatively complex access to the classical texts is only the start of this. So Darriusecq, Köhler, Balmer, Lewis, and Atkinson all describe translations and versions as forms of dialogue, intervention, or critique; Shapcott uses the notion of an 'argument', while Alice Oswald, perhaps most strikingly, describes her work as 'excavation'. Gender is important to all our authors: Köhler speaks of her interest in difference; Oswald speaks of motherhood; Shapcott discusses rape and sexual violence; Atkinson coins the idea of the 'Duffy phenomenon'. But the idea of gendered writing, of writing 'as a woman' is treated with caution, always. Nonetheless, we find that, taken together, the ten conversations in this issue do show that women's writing has opened windows to a different way of engaging with the Classics.

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