

Memorializing Motherhood: "Literary Women" and Modernity

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Memorializing Motherhood: *Literary Women* and Modernity

Perhaps nothing so marks Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* as a work of twenty years past than its subtitle: *The Great Writers*. In arguing that separate and serious attention be paid to women's literature as the literature that could only have been written by women, Moers embraces rather than avoids the daunting criteria of monumentality, grandeur, and massive and poised accomplishment. We tend to be less exacting, more democratic in our critical determinations about who or what is worthy of literary study. We pride ourselves that the women's literary tradition is hospitable to women struggling to express themselves despite limited education, limited means, and of course limited time apart from the domestic duties (drudgeries even!) customarily assigned them. Truth to life rather than literary power is our overriding criterion. Moers's enthusiasm for genius has not proved as irresistible as her more general reflections on "what it meant to be at once a woman and a writer."¹

But it is just this enthusiasm that inspirits her book from the outset. *Literary Women* opens with an epigraph in which Moers playfully but pointedly changes the gender in Emerson's famous definition of a poet so that the radical convictions that animate her study will first disclose themselves within the imperturbability of Emerson's prophetic rhetoric. The result is the dictum, at once grandiose and matter-of-fact in the Emersonian mode, that "the young woman reveres women of genius, because, to speak truly, they are more herself than she is. . . . For all women live by truth and stand in need of expression" (3). My own point here is not that Moers, writing twenty-odd years ago, needed to invoke Emerson's cultural authority to buttress her own pronouncements nor that she was so emancipated that she could freely play with the language of the fathers at a time when such licenses were rarer than they are now. What strikes the latter-day reader is the apparent lack of irony qualifying this declaration, which orients the book that follows. The epigraph makes the scope and intention

¹ Moers 1977, xiii. All citations are to this 1977 edition, one that has served me well for twenty years.

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of *Literary Women* immediately and unabashedly clear: Moers's primary subject will be the charismatic example of female genius, not those solidarities forged out of women's common experiences.

Such commonalities, of course, are acknowledged and duly honored in the sentence that inaugurates her study of the working life of literary women: "A woman's life is hard in its own way, as women have always known and men have rarely understood" (3). Yet Moers insists that her task is not to linger over the "surfaces of women's lives, but to track the deep creative strategies of the literary mind at work upon the fact of female" (xiv). To appreciate the critical daring as well as ideological import of Moers's ground-breaking study, one should recall that Moers proposed her genealogy of great writers at a time, an ongoing time I would venture, when the ideology of sisterhood dominated progressive and utopian thinking as a model of creative, socially productive relationships. Writing in the mid-1970s, Moers reflected:

Today it is fashionable to talk of the sisterhood of feminism as paradigm of that strength which issues from equality, but there is more in women's literature about the timeless bond of teaching, which links mother to daughter and teacher to pupil as equal to equal. "Mon enfant—allons chercher ensemble" are the words of dedication in equality that George Sand addressed to her daughter, when in her most feminist mood; and Mary Wollstonecraft has her pedagogue, Mrs. Mason, say, "You are now candidates for my friendship" to the little girls in her charge, when their "advancement in virtue" has progressed far enough toward that state of female perfection defined as equality of pupil with teacher. (349)

Moers's literary women are mothers and daughters before they are sisters. Sisters are born or presumed equal; daughters must labor to attain equality, must "advance" in Wollstonecraft's prescription, to the state of perfection held in trust, as it were, by the teacher-mother. Moers, distinctly Emersonian in this, sees literary women as drawing strength from isolation rather than sorority. She is in fact the first literary historian after Virginia Woolf to champion the inestimable value of seclusion for the female writer. "There must somewhere be a world apart, remote, serene, and orderly, where feminine authority can reign supreme," she writes, and then notes that "modern writers have gone even farther afield to find the metaphorical isolation required by female authority: Isak Dinesen to the African highlands, Willa Cather to the Nebraska frontier, Sigrid Undset to the feudal middle ages" (350). Nursery, schoolroom, matriarchal farm, a room of one's own—these are the sites Moers designates and explores as domains

of female creativity. But these are not the sanctuaries of feminist solidarity and fellow feeling; they are the isolated preserves of the Great Mothers.

Not friendly, helpful, indulgent, wise, kindly—or not just these—but great. In this judgment Moers remains adamant. Her ethic of greatness—for that is what it becomes in the course of her own great book—responds to an emotional and cultural fact to which she seems particularly sensitive. She begins her study by singling out women who, in the self-assessment of Harriet Beecher Stowe, had succeeded primarily by virtue of their deadly determination. Stowe, the first literary woman Moers profiles, impresses by the sheer audacity of her ambition when measured against the Sisyphean labor of “rowing against wind and tide” (Stowe’s words). Wind and tide are, of course, consciously poetic figures for the solicitations, often trivial, many peremptory, that beset Stowe as she attempts to write. Stowe confides how she has been “called off at least a dozen times: once for the fish man, to buy a codfish; once to see a man who had brought me some barrels of apples; once to see a book-man; then to Mrs. Upham, to see about a drawing I promised to make for her; then to nurse the baby; then into the kitchen to make a chowder for dinner; and now I am at it again.” But if Moers cannily engages our sympathy with this vivid anecdote excerpted from Stowe’s letters, she immediately advises that “there were some lucky ones, lucky by birth, circumstance, physique, temperament especially: that miracle of temperament which creates its own luck” (5). “Temperament which creates its own luck”—this is, I submit, as demystified yet reverent a definition of genius as one is likely to encounter in much contemporary feminist criticism, so skeptical, when not indignant, before unqualified assertions of artistic greatness. Although Moers writes knowingly about the domestic routines and social conventions that make a woman’s life hard in a way men rarely understand, she firmly maintains that genius creates its own luck, is the subject rather than the object of social determinations. Who believes, much less would venture, such a thought today? Yet Moers does, even insists on it.

Moers’s insistence that genius is self-determining and self-dependent is not personal (itself a reflex of her own critical temperament), but deeply, unapologetically ideological. By making achievement her touchstone, Moers aspires to counter, as if once and for all, the perennial stereotype that afflicts women’s writing: that women’s writing springs unadulterated from experience, that it is authentic to the degree that it is intuitive and artless. “The spontaneous, the instinctive, the natural, the informal, the anti-classical, and the artless”—these terms of art, she complains, “have been associated with the woman’s voice in literature from the beginning of time.” Moers objects to considering any of these qualities as characteristic of,

much less intrinsic to, woman's literary art, but she singles out spontaneity for inspiring a "terrifying ambivalence" in literary women "for it can be read as a challenge to genius—or as an excuse for failed work. It can characterize the art that springs from the richest and deepest reaches of the imagination—or the art that clearly lacks and clearly requires more control" (249).

For her part, Moers is intent on writing a history of literary women who have responded to the technical challenges of their art with visible, often astounding success. Her history is indeed rather remarkable in the degree to which she will countenance those successful literary women for whom she herself feels little imaginative or emotional sympathy. Occupying a singular place in that history is that woman of genius, Madame de Staël, whose greatest literary creation and alter ego, Corinne, gives Moers her most charismatic yet suspect archetype of female genius: the performing heroine. Moers was one of the first feminist critics to exhort us to take Madame de Staël's *Corinne* seriously, as she knew she must if she was to insinuate her love of greatness, since *Corinne* was the preeminent fantasy-myth of female genius in the tradition. But Moers also warns her readers that Corinne is potentially the most perilous model for the literary daughter to imitate. Moers could appreciate, even affirm "the myth of the famous woman talking, writing, performing, to the applause of the world" (268) because it might inspire women writers encouraged by the very possibility, however remote, of acclaim in an age that generally denied them any active role or visible recognition in the public sphere. Still, it soon becomes clear that Moers herself is highly suspicious of the Romantic, anticlassical audacities of Corinne's bardic performances. Corinne epitomizes for Moers the emotional lures and gratifications of self-display, but also its aesthetic and moral snares.

How baleful the temptation of self-display was to Moers's critical imagination can be gauged by the most astonishing judgment rendered in *Literary Women*, a judgment proffered against one of the most beloved of Victorian heroines, Dorothea Brooke. "Dorothea Brooke in *Middlemarch*," she writes, "is the worst kind of product of the myth of Corinne (and the worst sort of influence on novelists like Doris Lessing) for she is good for nothing *but* to be admired. An arrogant, selfish, spoiled, rich beauty, she does little but harm in the novel. Ignorant in the extreme and mentally idle (without feeling any of the guilt of Jane Austen's heroines for their failure to read) Dorothea has little of interest to say, but a magnificent voice to say it in" (296). This is arguably the most remarkable moment in *Literary Women*, a point at which literary criticism assumes the form of moral re-

buke. Moers castigates Dorothea for the sin of inattention, for languishing in an ignorance that stems from mental idleness rather than restricted opportunity. Especially noteworthy is her stern disapproval of Dorothea's failure to read — that most literary of failings. Behind Moers's censure is the impatience of a well-read but also worldly woman who admires and would promote a female heroinism that is determined and active, a heroinism that does not dally in amateurish pursuits but labors to master the great issues, indeed the very arts, of life. We can take the measure of Moers's distress at the spoilage of female talent in her observation that "an excess of early praise for amateur accomplishment may have done more than all the hardship of woman's lot to separate minor from major achievement among literary women" (300). I doubt whether such an unreserved assessment could be made so unreservedly today, when social and political determinations — the hardship of woman's lot — are routinely invoked as the source of value and interest in women's writing. I further doubt that many practicing critics would openly subscribe to Moers's stern advice that "the artist's life is not for spoiled children" (304). We may have lost the habit of making such judgments along with the distinctions, still so clear and obvious to Moers, between minor and major achievement. The consciousness of such distinctions is especially pronounced in Moers's attitude toward the spoiled daughters of art. The spoiled child is indeed the figure who haunts *Literary Women*, a reproach, we might say, to bad mothering.

Modernity makes its salutary presence felt initially as an antidote or astringent counterexample to the "bad" mothering that indulges rather than disciplines the talented young. In Moers's wonderful phrase, the "good" mother is the "Scheherezade of the nursery," a teller of tales but also a dispenser of moral instruction. She is the Mother apprehended in her power as Educator and Custodian of Culture. This consolidation of the mother's cultural and moral authority is registered, Moers argues, in a linguistic event of great historical importance "to literature, to pedagogy, and to heroinism: the official change in title from *la Gouvernante* to *le Gouverneur* which marked the climax of power in the career of Mme de Genlis, the eighteenth-century writer and educator. From *Gouvernante* to *Gouverneur* is a change as momentous in French as it is in English, for *Governess* is in the nursery, and *Governor* rules the world. And the educating heroine, as the writings of Mme de Genlis were among the earliest to show, stands for the heroinism of power" (325–26). This momentous accession to power reflects, according to Moers, "something new, something distinctive of modernity itself" (xi). A distinctly modern phenomenon, the heroinism of power, which accords an unprecedented and preeminent place to

woman's cultural as well as emotional authority, attains its most influential and sublime form in the greatest of all governing and teaching ranks: the Mother.

According to Moers, literary modernism develops under the spell of educating heroinism. Modern literary women, she observes, are especially drawn to the qualities that are inculcated by Educating Heroinism — severity, authority, timelessness, and isolation — which are also the qualities that empower and consecrate their art. They are precocious students as well as dutiful daughters and in their maturity come to regard the Mother's governance with equal degrees of filial esteem and defiance. They become keenly aware of the mother's seduction, the erotic ambivalence, even duplicity that enforces her emotional and moral rule. In modern times, Moers proposes, “the mother-daughter relationship which lies at the base of educating heroinism undergoes a characteristic twist: now it is not the parent's but the child's viewpoint which dominates” (354). This shift in perspective, which now privileges the child's over the parent's point of view, is one of the distinguishing features of modernity itself. It transforms received notions of the sex relation. Even more disturbing, it permits us to see that the mother-daughter relation may entail a “peculiar sexual drama — a sexuality without fulfillment, virtually without kindness” (353). Moers, as is her way, almost off-handedly remarks that the “modern” treatment of the sex relation, manifested in the growing neglect or outright satire of the courtship and marriage plot in modern fiction, can be traced to the daughter's restiveness with her mother's instruction in a “sexuality without fulfillment.” The Scheherazade of the nursery may have regaled her daughter with traditional tales of love, but the daughter's updated version recounts the thousand and one aberrations and fatalities of modern love: “the disparities of age; the odd pairings (or triplings or quadruplings) of lovers; the sexual disjunctions outside custom and marriage; the fantasies, sterilities, fetishes” (353). Such “modern” treatments of the sexual drama are not limited to restive or rebellious daughters, of course; they mark a generational and historical shift in attitudes toward the family, power, and sexuality. Moers argues that the special contribution of literary women to modernism was to document this historical shift through the vantage point of the daughter, who is at once subject to, and in recoil from, the mother's profound emotional and cultural sway. Moers, no more than ourselves, seems to have little cause to dispute Woolf's contention that “we think back through our mothers if we are women.” But Moers penetrates deeper into the troubled heart of the mother-daughter relation than Woolf did in *A Room of One's Own* (though not, it must be stressed, in her fiction) in attributing to modern women the insight — at times the highly refined

instinctual knowledge — that their future as writers might be divined, if not always secured, around the maternal deathbed.

In imagining such a scene, the daughter is released from her thralldom to the mother she had revered as Custodian of Culture and Keeper of all Human Affections. Moers proposes that the daughter's re-creation of the maternal deathbed and her unsentimental depiction of "the character of the aging female tyrant" (364) epitomize the emotional as well as aesthetic revolution accomplished by the four great women writers who dominate her account of literary modernism: Willa Cather and Colette, both born in 1873, Gertrude Stein, born a year later, and Virginia Woolf, born eight years later. All were women who came of age during the twilight years of those goddesses of the nineteenth century — the great queen mothers. By memorializing the matriarchs who reigned over their childhood, they ensured that their power would never come again. Or so Moers contends, in one of the most richly suggestive remarks in *Literary Women*: "They wrote of the power and grandeur of motherhood with an air of finality, as if what they were describing would never come again; as if there would never more be any mothers. They do not write of harassed, frantic, young mothers, but of mature, calm women of still, sculptural beauty" (359).

Yet it is less the grandeur of the Victorian mothers than the eminence of the modern daughters that haunts even as it impresses Moers. So much is apparent in her claim that Cather, Stein, Woolf, and Colette collectively represent a "peak of achievement from which our own later time may well seem, if not a falling away, clearly a descent" (355). An emotional chill endemic to high estates permeates her humbling encounter with these literary daughters who in turn have become, in Stein's phrase, the "Mothers of us All." The ambivalence toward genius that Moers so acutely discerns and analyzes in her general remarks is strangely personalized as she herself assumes the perspective of the awed, if somewhat resentful, daughter who cannot help detecting "something imposing, even alarming about the four of them." "As a company," she confesses, "I can't help visualizing them blocked out together in stone as a sort of Henry Moore grouping — massive sculptural forms, somber, solid, and remote, with heavy shoulders, strongly modeled skulls, and perhaps a hole — in the Moore style — where the heart is" (356). The general impression conveyed by this grouping is monumentality in the modern style — serene, impersonal, abstract, and cerebral. The arresting detail is the hole where the heart is — or ought to be. The absence of the heart could be taken as Moers's own figure for the calculated and principled refusal of sentimentality in the modernist commemoration of a motherhood "virtually without kindness." Certainly the modernity of literary women would appear to us in quite a different light

had Moers chosen to minimize or ignore the raw, even heartless, revolt of literary daughters, the resistance they mounted against the subtle tyrannies of educating mothers. Such mothers were modernism's most powerful and complex symbols of civilization; hence the need to memorialize, but also to exorcize them. "To see such women both as objects of inspiration and as threats to selfhood; to see them simultaneously afar and near—from within the female mind and body, within the nursery, the kitchen, the dressing table—is the woman writer's gift to modern literature," she concludes (365).

Moers's own gift to the feminist criticism of modern literature is to see and sustain this double vision of the great mothers. Her great teaching is that ambivalence is the lot ordained for daughters taught by their example, caught in their spell. We may all be ambivalent before the exacting standard of greatness, and Moers recognizes as much, but to shrink from its example is also to relinquish its sublimities. Moers's precious legacy to us is that she refuses to do either.

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Reference

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