The Female Pen

Women Writers and Novelists 1621–1818

by
B.G. MacCARTHY

with a preface by Janet Todd

CORK UNIVERSITY PRESS

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'But his misfortune was to fall in an obscure world that afforded only a female pen to celebrate his fame.'

Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko*, 1688

'Nay, even my own sex, which should assert our prerogative against such detractors, are often backward to encourage the female pen.'

Susannah Centlivre, Dedication to *The Platonic Lady*, 1707

'You know how female writers are looked down upon. The women fear and hate, the men ridicule and dislike them.'

Elizabeth Hamilton, *Letters to a Hindoo Rajah*, 1791

'Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands.'

Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, 1818

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B.G. MacCarthy (1904 - 1993)

Preface

A fascination for early women writers is a minority emotion, which is, happily, growing more general. B.G. MacCarthy's work, out of print since its initial publication in the 1940s, has for us workers in this vineyard the kind of status achieved in feminist theory by Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* or Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* — which MacCarthy took as her own starting point.

Writing during the Second World War when women assumed unusual roles, MacCarthy prefaced her work not with the common apology for its existence but with the assertion that she needed much space to treat her subject; if the War prevented her fom publishing in full, she would not respond by condensing but would divide her work into two volumes. She intended to quote expansively. Although she did not anticipate a time when many of the books she treated would be in print, she none the less made it clear that she valued these forgotten works and wished them to be sampled in her pages and then read in full. She did not, like Julia Kavanagh in *English Women of Letters* (1862) and so many other critics of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, describe only to dismiss.

B.G. MacCarthy is one of a generation of stalwart women who read extensively and then wrote authoritatively, having acquired confidence in their judgements which they assumed to be correct — women such as J.M.S. Tompkins, Joyce M. Horner and Edith Birkhead. Tompkins published her *Popular Novel in England, 1770–1800* in 1932; it brought into focus the huge mass of popular fiction, sensational gothic novels and sentimental romances, often by women, that had been largely ignored by critics in favour of the major male writings. Horner published *The English Women Novelists*

and their Connection with the Feminist Movement (1688–1797) in 1930 setting the claims of the women she chose to treat, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, against the conventional expectations of the women for whom they wrote. Edith Birkhead brought out her influential essay 'Sentiment and Sensibility in the Eighteenth Century Novel' in 1925; it describes the growth of the cult of sensibility often overlooked by early twentieth century critics with their eyes firmly on Romanticism. To this group of historical critics can be added Joan Riviere whose 'Womanliness as Masquerade', first published in 1929 in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* (X), influenced the conception of woman as masquerade, a notion that would be turned into a strategy for destabilizing patriarchal history and literature by modern feminist literary critics. These and many other women, including the social historians Alice Clark, Ivy Pinchbeck and Dorothy George, wrote vigorously and informatively and all prepared the way for the explosion of study that occurred from the late 1960s onwards. MacCarthy's and Tompkins' work on literary figures would be continued, in very different mode, in the encyclopaedias of early women's writing in the 1970s, in the histories of female fiction which came out in the 1980s, to be in turn succeeded by the more detailed, intricate studies of particular themes and individual authors of the 1990s. MacCarthy's legacy is the growth of the subject itself.

MacCarthy, Tompkins and Horner were academic in their research but their tone was inviting and conversational. They were secure in their views and they did not need to mystify an audience into respect by jargon or unnecessary notions taken from contemporary psychoanalysis and philosophy. They conversed with their readers, rather than dominating them with gnomic utterances and opinions which they could not test. They wrote cheerfully and well and made the reader feel comfortable in their work. *The Female Pen* breathes of an earlier age before academic literary specialization. The first few pages alone refer to Homer, Milton, Fielding, Emily Brontë, Marie de France, and George Elliot. MacCarthy weaves her way through criticism, manuscripts, collections and novels, making what must have been great labour easy for her reader. But she expects that reader to have a mind well-stocked with the major literature of Europe.

To read MacCarthy is to become acquainted with her. She is there on every page of her book in opinion and in style, but she never

succumbs to what she calls the 'dogmatism of the everlasting "I"'. Although close to Virginia Woolf as essay-writer, she lacks Woolf's occasionally overbearing quality. She takes the reader along with her, but then lets her read enough to judge. She surveys and generalizes and quotes from material in criticism and fiction that she has made her own. She does not, like so many of us now when academic criticism has been professionalized, give the impression of writing with a dictionary of quotations and a stack of new paperbacks on the latest theory. So she makes some mistakes in reference — as one would expect from someone conversing and eager to make her points.

MacCarthy has a definite sense of literature as an imaginative construction. She is a literary critic, not a modern cultural historian and she makes claims for her women in the context of her belief in values in art. She has no interest in the women writers who do not pretend to Literature, but who have come to prominence in recent years in accordance with new theories such as New Historicism or Cultural Materialism. So she ignores Ann Trapnel, Ann Collins and Anne Wentworth and the many other Quaker and Dissenting women of the seventeenth century, the aristocratic letter writers of the eighteenth century like Lady Mary Coke, and the cookery book and conduct book makers such as Hannah Wolley and Anna Laetitia Barbauld. This allows some judgements that we would now dispute: for example she can note that pre-Restoration women writers were mainly upper class because she overlooks those who were not and she asserts that women had no truck with the picaresque or rogue biography because she has little interest in the female rogues. Mary Carleton and Moll Cutpurse do not feature in her story. But her omissions are due to her view of art rather than to any moralistic scruples and she gives a spirited reading of Aphra Behn, 'the first and greatest of the literary swashbucklers'.

MacCarthy's thesis concerning women and the novel is a bold one. Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* had imagined a sister for Shakespeare, one just as gifted and profound as William. This woman, Woolf argued, would not have made it to London, where she would in any case have found the theatre a male-only affair both in acting and in writing, since she would have been raped and silenced long before she reached the city. To counter this thesis MacCarthy advances a far more positive and daring notion: that women are peculiarly associated with realism and verisimilitude.

In which case their long (relative) silence before the beginnings of the novel resulted not only from their imprisonment in ignorance but from their indifference to the dominant genres of men: the heroic epic, the saga or the pastoral. Shakespeare's sister failed to write not only because she was maltreated by men but also because she did not much care for her brother's sort of plays.

MacCarthy has none of the modern anxiety over identity and she gives no hint of the dispersed subject or of woman as a rhetorical position and strategy. The woman authors she treats were real and realized women who, like MacCarthy herself, were a little separate from sources of academic and literary power, but both she and they are empowered by the existence of that literary power. The women are often excused for their defects as artists by some personal detail: if the seventeenth-century biographies they wrote lacked irony, it was because of their grief. But the explained failure does not obliterate the notion of literary excellence itself which women are quite able to understand. In MacCarthy's pages we get to know the combative and litigious Anne Clifford, Duchess of Montgomery, of whom Donne wrote, 'She knew well how to discourse of all things, from predestination to slea-silk' and Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, whose mind was like a chaos of the firmament: 'comets, meteors, fireballs, planets, stars — a blazing world, an astounding coruscation of dazzling confusion', a woman who none the less was convinced of her 'infallibility as an author'. Because her writers are real people, MacCarthy can enter into their frustrations and hopes. Assuming some fixed female identity, she can make comparisons across the centuries, aligning Fanny Burney with Mary Davys, not worrying about inroads that culture makes in that identity.

As well as being recognizable human beings, MacCarthy's women are also writers. What they wrote was often 'art', defined as 'experience realized in a special way and expressed in a corresponding medium'. She has little time for that aesthetic transcendental claim with which men, especially in the nineteenth century, sought to evict women from the highest Literature. She keeps her amazement not for the alleged poor quality of women's writing through the ages, but for women's ability to write at all considering that they were so excluded from education and so crammed with prejudices about their feeble capacity. Because a few women writers can stand judgement in male terms, she is not

content to bypass the others who, she insists, must be judged in relation to their opportunities as well as to literary standards.

Like Virginia Woolf, MacCarthy fixes her women with an image: 'the Duchess of Newcastle was a diamond of the first water . . . uncut save for a facet or two which sent out a fitful and ill-balanced brilliance'. She imagines them in a revealing moment in action, high spirited and witty, always with their feet on the ground and their eyes open to the details of life, the feel of cloth or the texture of a fruit's skin. She illuminates her subject with metaphor and simile: women writers are like a visiting team in a hostile country; innovative women resemble hockey players using crochet hooks; women writers of the past are the common soldiers in a great campaign. Occasionally she overdoes it, mixing her metaphors with the ebullience of her full mind or making comparisons that overshadow her meaning. But, even then, she conveys excitement.

As with women, so with genres and movements of history. Fiction in the English Renaissance is a disowned foundling pining in the cellar. The Restoration is conveyed by the statement that 'the learned sock' was off and Shakespeare's granddaughter could come into her own with the 'comfortable buskin' of domestic intrigue. Historical changes are rendered through the psychology of individuals: the woman's entry into literature makes her solitary; she stops looking up to her man and so is condemned by him as loose or eccentric.

Although MacCarthy genuflects to Art and often takes major male writers as her model, such as Henry Fielding, she can be as astringent with canonized men as with little known women. Admitting that Lady Mary Wroth's *Urania* is dull and tedious except in the sub-plots, she asks daringly, 'Who will say that it is not wearying to plough through the *Arcadia* . . . ?', the influence of which is 'entirely to be deplored'. Even Samuel Richardson does not pass muster. Famed as he was for his 'marvellous insight into the female heart', he becomes in MacCarthy's pages an absurd fabler deluding men and women alike about the nature of women. In his heroines she sees an unpleasant self-consciousness which, despite being necessary for the epistolary method, is also distasteful.

She counters the absurdity displayed by men interpreting women by taking the male images and running with them towards the real women she knows. So she delightedly quotes

Addison's consumerist description of the lady living to be ornamented by furs and feathers, ores and silks. Then she allows the image to self-destruct in its confrontation with the gifted Brontës, for whom not even a moulting parrot would cast a feather, with poor ugly Harriet Martineau at whose feet no self-respecting lynx would cast his skin, and with George Eliot whom no furs, nor gems nor silks could adorn.

She also takes issue with silly male critics like Ernest Baker or T. Longueville to whose 'bad-tempered book' we 'need not refer . . . again'. As for Horace Walpole, his judgement is marred by his 'finicking celibacy' as he sits in his 'little pseudo-Gothic stronghold at Strawberry Hill'. The work of such a man becomes a 'miasma of malicious preciosity'.

Like Ian Watt, whose influence on the study of male fiction has been so influential, MacCarthy has a teleological sense of the novel. So it has its muling infancy and awkward adolescence as it moves towards the triumphant maturity of nineteenth-century realism. She shares with Bakhtin a preference for the people over their rulers, elevating folk tales, chap-books and popular fiction above the artificial and intricate literature of the upper orders. In one of her characteristically luxuriant metaphors, the latter becomes an unnatural fungus beside the fresh sunny fruit of the lower ranks who value character and story-telling, the essence of the novel.

Clearly MacCarthy enjoys exuberance. But she has a stern morality as well. Often she justifies her writers' naughty freedoms by the standards of their age, but her notion of virtue and vice prevents her celebrating this freedom. So the early eighteenth-century writers, Manley and Haywood, become inhabitants of a noxious swamp and debauchers of the novel. MacCarthy tries to explain her morality in artistic terms: the depiction of vice is monotonous. But, then, as she clearly reveals, so is the depiction of virtue — at least the depiction provided by the majority of eighteenth-century women writers. But although she does not generalize on virtue as she does to the detriment of vice, on the whole she cannot be accused of prejudice in favour of the virtuous writer and she has some tart remarks on Katherine Philips, the 'Matchless Orinda' whose morals were famous. For MacCarthy she is a 'fine example of what may be achieved when a facile talent is exploited by a pose so convincing that it is even self-hypnotic.' The pious Mrs Rowe is dismissed in an adjective: 'the excrutiating Mrs Rowe'.

Clearly, whatever her expressed opinion, MacCarthy's writing suggests a preference for the 'school of female desperadoes', which includes Aphra Behn and the *risqué* Delarivier Manley, to the 'legions of . . . expostulating, explaining, defending' ladies of the eighteenth century. She found in these latter a 'distasteful sex-consciouseness'. However she might condemn the wicked 'swash-buckling' women, like Milton she appears to have been on the side of energy, giving especial life to what she herself avowedly disapproved. Indeed she is closest in her authorial self-image to the Restoration women writers whose intellectual vigour she memorably portrays: 'They could not shelter behind a coat of arms, or a sermonizing mediocrity, or a *precieux* classicism, nor lap themselves about with the facile and soothing adulation of a select coterie'.

MacCarthy has none of the trepidation of modern female critics before the male noun and pronoun, no need for the tortuous plurals that her descendants have to employ to avoid mention of 'man' and 'his' world. She also lacks fear of the slippery words such as 'classicism', 'romanticism' and 'symbol' on which later critics have expended so much labour. She defined them in a straightforward and useful way, sufficient for her purpose. Her aristocrats are given their titles in contrast to the rather bizarre modern practice of denying such women as Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, her much-loved rank.

There is no denying that the first volume sparkles more than the second. The writers she treats in volume II are better known on the whole than those of volume I and her method of plot summary followed by speedy assessment can become tiresome when the works are familiar. This is especially so with the section on Jane Austen where summary is followed by rhapsody. But MacCarthy makes some useful points with these late writers none the less. She sees the literary ambition behind the eighteenth-century woman writer's necessary pretence of humility and she insists on the neglected female contribution to the epistolary form which Richardson is so often seen as inventing. And there are still the fresh judgements and asides: Mrs Haywood never learned 'the value of moderation'; Clara Reeve, writing a Gothic novel, calls up the picture of 'a maiden lady in elastic-sided boots, endeavouring to control a mustang' and 'Miss Knight (Ellis Cornelia Knight who continued *Rasselas*) evidently felt that

two marriages would produce a greater amount of happiness than one, and gracefully ignored the question of ratio.'

Between the two volumes MacCarthy seems to have become more nationalistic — or perhaps the second volume allowed her more scope for expression. We are told whenever a writer has any possible link with Ireland: Fanny Burney's Irish ancestors on her father's side and Mary Wollstonecraft's Irish mother are both mentioned, although even her distant Irish heritage cannot save Fanny Burney from contempt and MacCarthy gleefully quotes her dreadful sentences. Maria Edgeworth is found unworthy of an Irish connection: although it seems for a paragraph or two that her Irishness might be approved, she is in the end taken to task for her Ascendancy social position which will not let her write what MacCarthy wishes to read. Her Irish stories therefore carry conviction only to those who do not 'fully know Ireland'.

Inevitably MacCarthy's book lacks the intricate theory that came to mark much criticism on women from the 1970s onwards, the sort that can only occur when many scholars work in the same area and inspire each other to greater discrimination and subtlety. Early women writers now inhabit an expanding universe and a growing body of scholars push deeply into the texts of the recently canonized writers and bring into prominence characters which MacCarthy would have judged irredeemably minor.

Inevitably, too, scholarship has marched on and left some of her assumptions, opinions, and facts behind. Take, for example, the case of Aphra Behn. MacCarthy accepts Montague Summers' belief that Behn was the Afara Amis born at Wye in 1640, unaware that the Burial Register indicated her death two days later. Behn's background is even now insecure, but it seems more likely that she was the Eaffrey Johnson born to a barber in Harbledown in Kent. When she interrupts her rapid production of plays in 1682, MacCarthy assumes this is because she was arrested for defaming the Duke of Monmouth. She was indeed taken to task for her epilogue to *Romulus* but the offence does not seem to have been regarded very seriously. The main reason for Behn's switch from play-writing to prose fiction and translation was the amalgamation of the two licenced London theatres and the decreased need for new plays that affected all the dramatists of the time; in the harsh years that followed, Behn was especially fortunate in having more of her plays revived than most playwrights. As to her works, the one

most praised by MacCarthy is now generally thought not to be by her: *The Ten Pleasures of Marriage* which appears to be written by a man, to contain the kind of rollicking misogyny that Behn rarely reveals, and to depict a bourgeois life that she only touches on in her other works. Because MacCarthy has dismissed the extraordinary achievment of *Love-Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister* as 'libellous effusions' and indeed seems not to have read the original but rather a verse edition of Part I, not written by Behn, she needs to find something other than this extraordinary novel to occupy Behn's fertile pen during the time of its writing. The dates she gives for *The Unfortunate Bride: or, The Blind Lady a Beauty*, *The Dumb Virgin: or, the Force of Imagination*, *The Wandring Beauty* and *The Lucky Mistake* were based on Vita Sackville-West's errors; the first three were in fact posthumously published and the final one (in 1689) may well have been likewise.

These changes in opinion and developments in research do not invalidate MacCarthy's general treatment of writers such as Behn or her overall thesis. If one cannot take *The Female Pen* as her contemporaries could, as 'a standard work of reference for the period' (*The Standard*) it is still possible to echo the sentiment of the *The Irish Times*, that for the reader 'in search of something witty, interesting and astringent it is a real treasure-trove'.

B.G. MacCarthy had a long career. She was born in Cork in 1904, experienced the struggles for Irish independence, struggles which no doubt contributed to her fervent nationalism in later life. She took her BA at University College, Cork, in 1925 and an MA two years later, distinguishing herself in both degrees. She then took a Ph.D. in Cambridge, finishing in 1940, her thesis forming the basis of what became *The Female Pen*. As a teacher at the Craiglockhart RC Training College in Edinburgh, later as a lecturer in the Department of Education in Cork, and still later as a professor in the English department in Cork, her style of teaching appears to have been similar to that of her written works: her referees write much of her vigour and enterprise.

Nothing in her life, however, quite prepares one for the two volumes of *The Female Pen*, vol. I coming out from Cork University Press in September 1944 for 10s. 6d. and vol. II from Cork and Blackwells in Oxford just after the war in 1947. Having made this dazzling academic beginning in a subject quite alien to most of

her colleagues, she seems to have preferred teaching to writing, subsequently authoring only a couple of plays, some essays on Irish male writers, one or two on Irish women, and one on the cinema, all published in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* and *The Dublin Magazine*. Many of these breathe pride in her religion, her country, and in the city of Cork round which many of her articles revolve. Even the two that might seem to avoid this generalization — on Emily Brontë and Thackeray — concern the relationship of these to Ireland, and, in Thackeray's case, to Cork. To her successors it might seem disappointing that she did not follow her groundbreaking work with further studies of women writers, but one should remember the context in which she wrote. To her contemporaries she caused surprise that someone of her calibre should waste energy on women novelists at all.

The outer events of her personal history are quickly told. She married but lived with her husband only for a short time before she separated from him. In this situation she resembled many of the woman novelists she disapproved, such as Eliza Haywood and possibly Aphra Behn. After her years in Edinburgh she moved back into her childhood home with her mother. When her mother died, she lived with her aunt to whom she dedicated the second part of *The Female Pen* (the first being dedicated to her parents). She retired — very thoroughly — in 1966, giving away her extensive library to her friends and declaring she had 'had enough'. She left a memory of an abrasive temper and an exhilarating style.

Like so many women of her generation she disliked modern American-influenced feminism; she thought it 'silly' and was aghast that she and Virginia Woolf should ever be classed as 'feminists'. Again one should remember her context. It was in 1947 that Ferdinand Lundberg and Marynia Farnham published *Modern Woman: The Lost Sex* in which the eighteenth-century feminist Mary Wollstonecraft was displayed as a severe case of penis envy, the epitome of the modern degenerate woman who mistakenly thought to equal man despite her possession of distinct sexual organs — which, to clinch their case, Lundberg and Farnham list in detail. It is also salutary to note that the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1945 felt the need to defend MacCarthy from 'aggressive feminism' because of her subject;

happily the reviewer could assure her potential readers that there was 'no ground for that suspicion — no trace of "sex-antagonism" or other such nonsense'. The review in *Studies* again suggests her uneasy context when it takes her to task for some of her claims for women, though it does agree that she has discovered 'amid much rubbish in these forgotten books, gleams of true feminine observation of life . . . '.

I never met Professor MacCarthy. I was planning to visit her in Cork in the summer of 1993 but, sadly, she died in April. Probably it was as well that the meeting did not take place. Like so many high-achieving women who came to maturity between the wars, who faced the dilemmas of marriage and career and the often conflicting demands of family and of the self, she was stridently anti-feminist. If she did not take kindly to modern feminists, I in turn am not attracted to nationalism; so a real-life conversation might have been tense. This way I know her entirely through her book and can renew my acquaintance at any time. Thus I can enjoy her wit without needing to combat the astringency and the security of opinion. I hope new readers will treasure the acquaintance as much as I do.

Janet Todd
Norwich, 1993