

No brilliant friend? Literary acknowledgement between the sexes

Author: Terence Rajivan Edward

Abstract. This paper responds to an essay by Elena Ferrante on male literary figures acknowledging the influence of female ones. She poses a question about her reception by males which I address.

A little essay for *The Guardian* newspaper opens as follows:

Do men learn from women? Often. Do they admit it publicly? Rarely, even today. Let's stick to literature. No matter how hard I try, I can't think of many male writers have said that they were in any way indebted to the work of a woman writer. Among Italians only one comes to mind... (2018)

"Why among Italians? This is an English newspaper!" I anticipate someone's saying. The essay is by an Italian writer, one better known as a novelist, namely Elena Ferrante. She asks:

In other words, if you are a male writer who reads me and finds me good, are you paying me a generous compliment of the sort paid to a female student who has learned her lesson well?

I have only read some essays by Ferrante and I would not characterize her writing in this way. Probably it is true that some writers, long after leaving school, still approach writing as if they were in a school prize competition, for best essay or best fiction or best poem. Given my preconceptions, Ferrante does not seem near the hypothetical prize.¹ I think hers is a good idea for a newspaper essay – acknowledgement of literary influence between the sexes

¹ Of course it is difficult now: all the former students all over the world and many still writing for that school prize, imaginary mark scheme by their side! Presumably not Greta Thunberg though.

(assuming two sexes) – but I would expect this particular idea to be combined with better research and on display as well: lists of male literary figures acknowledging females versus females acknowledging males; more cases, mainstream and less mainstream, even prestigious and less prestigious.² But perhaps it is not entirely Ferrante’s fault; the inequality caused by different social networks has a role to play. I shall try to flesh out this thought below.

“No matter how hard I try, I can’t think of many...”: Ferrante portrays herself as pursuing the task all alone within the confines of her mind. What about friends?³ Perhaps she does not have friends, or ones with the relevant knowledge. Here is what I imagine happening if her social circle were different.

Ferrante: I’ve been trying to think of cases in which males in literature acknowledge the influence of female contributors. I can think of hardly any. There’s Lampedusa acknowledging Virginia Woolf. Any others?

Victorian scholar friend: What about Dickens’ praise for Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Molly Barton*? Or what about Thomas Hardy acknowledging the influence of George Eliot? He was described as George Eliot’s aptest pupil.

Modernist scholar friend: It’s *Mary Barton*! How about Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein? Stein is regarded as Hemingway’s mentor.

Literary gossip friend: Didn’t Hemingway also say that the Nobel Prize should be given to Isak Dinesen? Does anyone think Hemingway is better?

² By the way, if we turn to the essays of Virginia Woolf, Ferrante’s one example of an acknowledged female, we often find a lot of information about literary figures.

³ Also what about Internet search engines? I did a Google search for “Males who acknowledge female writers” and the fifth hit is “Great literary husbands,” but perhaps the results were different when Ferrante wrote.

Modernist scholar friend: The Nobel prize committee do! There's Robert Graves acknowledging the influence of Laura Riding. W.H. Auden and various less known poets do as well. Marjorie Perloff describes Riding as mainly appreciated by male critics.

Victorian scholar friend: Didn't Robert Bridges write a poem to Emily Brontë?

Ichikawa friend: This is all very Western. What about Tanizaki translating Lady Murasaki?

Ancient scholar friend: Plato described Sappho as the tenth muse!

Victorian scholar friend: There's more to literature than the schoolroom classics. M.R. James said that Margaret Oliphant's "The Open Door" was one of only two really good ghost stories in the English language "wherein the elements of beauty and pity dominate terror." Horace Walpole, pioneer of the gothic novel, was famous for being influenced by blue stockings. Ann Radcliffe was another important figure in the development of the Gothic novel, praised by the Marquis de Sade.

Sarraute friend: Francis King paid tribute to Ivy Compton-Burnett. It is he who rejects the speculation that she was a wounded emotional child.

Modernist scholar friend: Everyone assumes there is mutual influence in marriages: Leonard Woolf and Virginia Woolf, Richard Aldington and Hilda Doolittle.

Ferrante: Thanks friends!

You could once pay for the information – "one of our clients... asks us to look for mentions of a certain half-forgotten German author" (Morris 1926: 386) – and I suspect the practice continues to this day. Very early on in this century, I was hired to make a bibliography on relativism and bioethics. Even if the inequality caused by different social networks has some role to play, I suspect it is a minor one – more information could have been acquired.

References

- Baker, D. 1993. *In Extremis: The life of Laura Riding*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Bridges, R. 1923. Emily Brontë. *The London Mercury* 8 (44): 120.
- Buruma, I. 2015. The Sensualist. *The New Yorker* July 13th 2015. Available at:
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/07/20/the-sensualist-books-buruma>
- Dickens, C. 1850. Letter to Elizabeth Gaskell. January 31st 1850. *Letters of Charles Dickens to Elizabeth Gaskell*. Available at: <http://victorian-studies.net/CD-Letters-EG.html>
- Ferrante, E. (translated by A. Goldstein) 2018. This is a great time for writing by women – so why are still considered second-rate? *The Guardian* Saturday 27th October 2018.
- Gillespie, B.I. 1903. The influence of George Eliot upon Thomas Hardy. University of Illinois MA thesis:
<https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/52670/influenceofgeorg00gill.pdf?sequence=2>
- King, F. 2009. A great novelist. *The Spectator* 19th December 2009. Available at:
<https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/a-great-novelist>
- Macaulay, T.B. 1833. Horace Walpole. Available at:
https://www.gutenberg.org/files/2332/2332-h/2332-h.htm#link2H_4_0009
- Miller, L. 2014. Great literary husbands: The men who supported genius. *Salon* February 21st 2014. Available at:
https://www.salon.com/2014/02/21/great_literary_husbands_the_men_who_supported_genius/
- Morris, I.V. 1926. A Tale from the Grave. *The Calendar of Modern Letters* 2 (12): 379-395.
- Perloff, M., 1998. The Witch of Truth. *Parnassus* 23 (1): 334-353. Available at:

<http://marjorieperloff.blog/reviews/laura-riding/>

Ross, W. and Taylor, M. 2017. The Open Door by Margaret Oliphant. *A Podcast to the Curious* October 15th 2017. Available at:

<http://www.mrjamespodcast.com/about-the-podcas/>