Celebrating Women’s Writing: Marie Mulvey Roberts in conversation with Janet Todd

The central ethos of WSG is to support its members to create innovative, rigorous and socially meaningful research into women’s history and gender studies. WSG members have been involved in path-breaking work in our fields, one being the formation by Janet Todd and Marie Mulvey-Roberts of the journal Women’s Writing in 1994. In a conversation that took place at Oxford, Bristol and Cambridge across 2016-17, Janet and Marie celebrated the journal and its festschrift edition for Janet, and reflected on the early days of WSG. It is our great pleasure to present selections of the conversation to readers now. This is the sixth post in our series celebrating the history of WSG.

Celebrating Women’s Writing and the festschrift edition for Janet Todd (Women’s Writing, Volume 23, 2016 – Issue 3)

Marie Mulvey-Roberts and Janet Todd, founders of Women’s Writing

In conversation in 2016–2017

at Mansfield College, Oxford, Bristol and Cambridge

JT: We are here for a dual purpose, and I’m very grateful for it. Let’s start with the journal which is so important to us both. Do you think, Marie, that the Women’s Studies Group (WSG) was an important factor in the founding of Women’s Writing?

MMR: Absolutely, it created the right sort of climate. I was fortunate enough to be around at the start of the WSG and have a vivid memory of the energy and drive of members such as Yvonne Noble, Isobel Grundy, Mary Waldron, Lois Chaber and Linda Bree. In those early days, it really did feel like being on the cusp of something new and exciting, of a different sphere of women’s writing being opened up. Everyone seemed so knowledgeable. I remember Isobel Grundy talking about Lady Mary Wortley Montague and calling her ‘Lady Mary’, as though they were close friends. And that was how several other members related to some of these early women writers. I wanted my own very special relationship too! I think of your unique rapport with Mary Wollstonecraft. At that time, I had been researching Freemasonry, so it was refreshing to get into a world of women writers and scholars. The WSG wasn’t exactly a female secret society, since the idea was to open up neglected periods of women’s writing, but it gave me a sense of being at the start of something almost underground, which has since surfaced, expanded and flourished. Here was a tangible community of scholars from which the journal could draw sustenance, so the existence of the WSG was certainly both timely and inspirational.

JT I was interested in starting the journal with you because I had ‘history’. I had actually started the first journal devoted to women’s writing ages before in Florida, but it came to a natural end when I left America. It was begun in 1969–70 and called The Mary Wollstonecraft Newsletter. Do you remember Cyclostyle printing? You had
to ink the press by hand and then run it round and round. As more and more people
wanted the newsletter, so I would have to roll off more copies, then put them in
envelopes, find stamps and take them to the post – a one-woman enterprise at the
start. I took the newsletter to Rutgers in 1974 where it became Women and
Literature, finally morphing into a biannual volume of essays. But I think the most
exciting period was that very early stage concentrating on Wollstonecraft and the
largely ignored women of her period and working with just one or two other
enthusiasts. I was amazed and very pleased to find that there was anyone other than
maybe four or five of us who were really interested in this area, but very quickly I
discovered there were people working on Helen Maria Williams, Charlotte Smith,
Mary Hays etc. – writers who were absolutely unknown in the wider world and
indeed in universities. When you and I talked of starting this new journal, I thought
at first, “here we go again.” In fact it has been very different because the times are
very different. There is now far more interest in early women writers than there was
then. The articles submitted don’t have to be stodgily descriptive and informative, as
some of them had to be in my first journal, because readers can be expected now to
know something of the subjects; we can assume a culture of knowledge and a shared
experience of feminist scholarship.

MMR I remember our discussions about finding a name. Because you had already
run a journal called Women and Literature, you were understandably not keen when
I suggested it for a title. You made the point that women’s writing was broader than
that anyway and the new journal should encompass different kinds of writing, such
as diaries, journal entries etc... so it made sense to call it simply Women’s Writing.
That was also the kind of inclusiveness characteristic of the WSG. Members have
been enormously supportive of the journal over the years as contributors, editors,
referees, reviewers and readers. It was wonderful to see so many WSG members at
the conference we organised to celebrate WoW [Women’s Writing] at Lucy
Cavendish College in 2010 during your time as President there.

JT I was not there at the beginning of WSG, so please do say something about the
early days?

MMR I am proud to have been a founder member and was a member of the
executive committee for some years. You might remember how I used to get guest
speakers for the WSG section of the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies’
annual conference. I also organised a one off event at Senate House called
“Demystifying the Female: She-Devils, Saints and Signifiers” in November 1990. The
most memorable speaker was Marina Warner. The lineup was far more eclectic than
any conference the WSG would run these days. The call for papers had been too wide
and we ended up with a New Age speaker on the feminine divine or the divine
female, which ever one it was, it really didn’t work for the conference. Another
speaker who was rather out of step was Devendra Varma, whose old-fashioned
chauvinism grated on several speakers as sexist, so that when it came to discussing a
possible publication, they refused to be published between the covers of the same
book. Since he was the keynote speaker, I felt that I had to abandon that idea
altogether. When the Enlightenment Congress came to Bristol, I ran the Women’s
Studies section and had invaluable support and input from members of the WSG.
Apart from conference organising, I have given talks to the group on Rosina Bulwer
Lytton, Anna Wheeler, and also Mary Shelley and Mary Wollstonecraft. You and I edited special anniversary issues on both of them, which you may recall.

**JT** I do indeed.

**MMR** For the Mary Shelley one, I did something a bit out of the ordinary for a journal by including a play by Judith Chernai, which consisted of a dialogue between Mary Shelley and the ghost of her mother Mary Wollstonecraft. I dedicated it to my mother, who died the year it came out in 1999. A few years earlier, I found my very own woman writer – Rosina Bulwer Lytton and started working on her, as well as her mother, Anna Wheeler. Because of this, I was drawn to a workshop in 2008 that the WSG were running on mothers and daughters, so I asked Joanna Goldsworthy who had been researching Wheeler and translating her work from the French to give a joint paper with me. We wrote it up for a chapter in the WSG book on female collaborations, which was being put together in memory of Mary Waldron.

**JT** Mary, of course, was our excellent Reviews Editor for Women’s Writing and later became a member of the editorial board. She also edited one of our best ever issues, which was on Jane Austen.

**MMR** And we are revisiting Jane Austen for another issue in the not so distance future. Even though I have spent most of my academic career in Bristol, it was Mary’s work on Ann Yearsley that prompted me to start looking into links with early women writers and the city and that is something that has continued and is evident in this book too in fact. The WSG book is a tribute to her major contribution to scholarship and her stalwart membership. The book, edited by Carolyn Williams, Angela Escott and Louise Duckling is called *Woman to Woman: Female Negotiations during the long Eighteenth-Century* and it really captures the collaborative nature of the WSG. You did a book which reminds me of it called Women's Friendship in Literature, written while you were teaching in the States in the 1970s. Did you find any differences with feminism in America as opposed to Britain?

**JT** There was a feminist movement in Britain in the late 1960s and early 1970s, but there wasn’t much of an academic literary one and not much empirical historical groundwork being done — at least not much that I came across. Political socialist feminism was vibrant; but less of the academic sort that was so helpful to people in their careers in America. The book on women’s relationships which I wrote then was well received in the US and the topic seemed timely. In fact I discovered that Nina Auerbach was writing a book on communities of women in the 19th century at the same time and we realised we were doing similar kinds of interpretative and excavating work for different periods. In England however, when the book came out there, I had a real blast in the *T.L.S.* from Anita Brookner. Most of us remember bad reviews, completely forgetting the good ones. I remember this one vividly because it objected not so much to the book, which was hardly mentioned, but to the notion of female friendship. Brookner’s point was that anything that proposed to go against the great heterosexual romance was dangerous, and the idea of female friendships undermined it. I found it particularly sad because I loved Anita Brookner’s novels.
She was just that little bit older than me, and just a little bit further ahead of me in life; I used to think I could read one of her books and know what was coming my way.

**MMR** You mapped out the field for academic feminism with your dictionaries in the 1980s – A Dictionary of British and American Women Writers1660-1800 and then the Dictionary of British Women Writers. Were they very daunting tasks to put together, because you were a pioneer?

**JT** The first one, the Restoration to the eighteenth century, that was a huge amount of work, and I struggled to get contributors — Betty Rizzo in particular was a wonderful and very willing help. But on the whole I found it very difficult to get people to write entries on women they didn’t know; so I was forced to write a fair number of entries myself to complete the book. Nowadays, I would spend a lot more time on each of the authors, but I gather that my quick and rather summary opinions have allowed more dedicated people to begin talks with “As Janet Todd curiously thinks.” In this way I have performed a service to the academy.

**MMR** Your service is often seen as your work on Mary Wollstonecraft and collaboration with Marilyn Butler. What drew you to Mary Wollstonecraft when she was such a neglected figure?

**JT** It was a joy to do something like this with Marilyn Butler, a woman I admired immensely. Originally I knew only The Rights of Woman but came to appreciate so much more. After editing the Works with Marilyn, I edited the letters by myself. And it was the letters that really drew me in. I found Wollstonecraft a very emotionally attractive figure — and, I thought, very understandable. I worked on her for so long that I started to, well, not identify with her, because after all she was supremely clever and original, but I did see and sympathize with her prickly, difficult side. So, when I came to write a biography of her, I felt I was able to make one or two critical remarks about her despite the fact that she had come to be the great icon of early feminism. Looking at her through the letters of her sisters, I realised what a struggle it was for them to cope with this brilliant sister despite her being so generous to them. In other biographies she was made more romantic and simply heroic: for me she emerged as very human while being a brilliant trailblazer. I loved her writings including her novels and letters. Way before it became common, she was trying to describe her inner life and fluctuations of emotions. It isn’t quite Elena Ferrante, but Wollstonecraft was getting very close to the nitty gritty of female experience in a way that I don’t think any other woman had done before her.

**MMR** Do you remember the issue of Women’s Writing you and I edited together on Mary Wollstonecraft, and the cover? I went to a Mary Wollstonecraft conference in Norway and I came across an exhibition at an art gallery where there were spoof covers of her books based on Mills and Boon-type romances, so we decided to use one for the Vindication of a bare-chested man with a woman gazing adoringly up at him, and it did upset some people. I think that was our favourite cover. One of the other surprising things about the journal is that we have never had an issue so far on female biography if you think of all your work. But the good news is that we
are having one soon and it will be edited by Gina Luria Walker and Mary Spongberg. In fact, it will include the first article of mine to be published in the journal, which is going to be about Rosina Bulwer Lytton and how her biographer treated her.

**JT** Yes, I remember that rather startling cover for the Wollstonecraft issue! I have loved writing biographies — after Wollstonecraft, I went on to write about her tragic daughter Fanny and her Irish pupil Lady Mount Cashell — and I look forward to our issue on the subject of biography in general. When I began writing women’s lives, it wasn’t very fashionable in universities, but now biography has become a subject of study in its own right while the practice has become excitingly experimental.

**MMR** I wanted to ask you about the transition you have made from biography to fiction with your latest book, *A Man of Genius*. Did you find it difficult to make that transition and is there a lot of your academic work coming through?

**JT** I hope not! I’ve always wanted to write fiction. And I always did in some form. Some of the novels are finished and some now hopelessly out of date. I fell into rather than chose an academic ‘career’. It is not perhaps the easiest way to make a living, but it is a whole lot easier than making a living by writing (non-crime) fiction; you are not going to keep a family on royalties unless you win a big prize or in some way hit the jackpot. Now that I’ve stopped working for a salary I’ve got the chance to do it and it’s a real joy. The lovely thing about fiction is you don’t have to tell the truth. I’ve always liked speculation and I like speculation in biography. When I wrote the Aphra Behn book there was a lot of speculation in it simply because there are not so very many facts securely known about her; so, if you are not going to speculate, you will write a very short book. I brought in a lot from other people’s diaries and letters to provide a context for her and, I hope, make her live through her own and other people’s words and within her exotic and tumultuous time. I am about to revise it for renewed publication in 2017, over 20 years since its first publication, and I realise again how exciting both the character and her times are. It was the book I think that gave me most trouble to write and was in some ways the most rewarding since when I began I had no idea quite how remarkable a writer and woman Behn was. So it’s a good time to be writing biography but for me: it became a stepping stone to fiction. The speculation in biography needs to be as close to the truth as it can be – and I hope I stayed with this in the Aphra biography. But in fiction one can follow other kinds of ‘truth’ than just the straightforward and empirical.

**Audience** Because of the difficulty for feminist-minded scholars to get a foothold into institutions of learning [in Britain] – and you are one of the pioneering figures – did you position yourself in a coterie of any kind? Did you feel, at the time, that you were able to connect up with like-minded women scholars, or did you feel you had to just pursue what you were doing as well as you could?

**JT** I was in America and the scholars you refer to were in England. So, no, I didn’t know them. The people I knew were Elaine Showalter and Adrienne Rich and Catherine Simpson, and so on – the coterie of New York. Very impressive women from a completely different background from me. At Rutgers, Douglass College we started the first Women’s Studies programme in America, and I did find that world...
quite nurturing intellectually. Coming back to Britain was something of a shock. Beyond Marilyn Butler I hardly knew any women scholars. I loved the work of Barbara Hardy and Barbara Everett, but I didn’t really know them. I was first of all at Southampton University where French theory including French feminist theory was the dominating intellectual system. I enjoyed reading Kristeva and Cixous, but was not much influenced by their manner of writing. I remained interested in excavating early women writers – I remember Kristeva in New York and finding her very politely critical and slightly contemptuous when I showed her my journal with its Anglo-Saxon ‘empirical’ work! The greatest excitement for me was my first reading of Kate Millet’s Sexual Politics in America. It is mistaken in most of its close interpretations but the whole tenor of the book and the overall thesis were amazing to me then: the notion that indeed the personal and the political could cohere and be found together in literature.

**Audience:** Who have been your greatest role models throughout your career?

**JT** I don’t think I had any role models – that’s probably my trouble. We moved so much when I was a child that I didn’t have a schoolteacher I liked for any length of time. In Sri Lanka my mother made me cut out the ‘Worthy Women’ from a comic called Girl which we had sent out from England. I put the cutouts in a scrap book. The women were the sort who went off to become missionaries, travelling into the Gobi Desert on camels or steamy jungles, wearing enormous scarves tied round floppy hats; then the queens like Boudicea. I couldn’t much relate to them. As I speak, I’m still thinking of role models and I’ve come up with someone I might have had: I once shared a platform with Germaine Greer. She was already famous because of The Female Eunuch. She and I came together in the US, because we wrote on Aphra Behn. On the platform she was standing there about five feet taller than I, completely upright, and riding roughshod right over what I thought of as my far better arguments. I was bowled over by her self-confidence and wish I had had someone like that to copy in the beginning. But probably at just over five feet and with many Welsh inhibitions I would not have got far!

**MMR** Being Welsh too and also around the same height, that alerts me to announce that we have published an issue in *Women’s Writing* on Welsh Women Writers, edited by Jane Aaron – so look out world for that!

**JT** Back to what I was saying – no, I have no real models. I don’t know if I really understand the concept. Do you have them?

**MMR** Alas yes. I can honestly say that when I first joined the WSG, it was awash with role models, which was inspiring of course but also a bit overwhelming too!

**JT** Well you are rather younger than me, Marie! Let’s just say that we are a mixture of role models and friends for each other, which is why it has been such a pleasure to work together.