

---

Vicki Mistacco. *Les Femmes et la tradition littéraire*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. 570p.

JOCELYNE LE BER  
ROYAL MILITARY COLLEGE OF CANADA

*Les Femmes et la tradition littéraire* is an anthology dedicated to women writers from the Middle Ages to the 18th century. Through the many illustrations and critical comments, the reader will discover a wealth of women writers, some well-known and some more obscure. Forty writers are presented as a kind of “contre Académie,” or counter literary movement, to counterbalance the traditional roster of authors. The author, Vicki Mistacco, has succeeded in giving a voice to women who sought to be heard but who historically were kept silent. Through various literary forms, such as myths, short stories, poems, letters, excerpts of novels and manifestos, the reader enters into the memories of forgotten women, thereby rendering them immortal.

When and why women have felt the need to write? Vicki Mistacco answers these questions by referring to the myth of Philomela and her sister, Procne, from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Tereus, king of Thrace, raped his sister-in-law, Philomela, and cut out her tongue so that she could not tell of this misdeed. The victim then wove a tapestry depicting the rape and sent it to her sister Procne, Tereus’ wife. This myth, which is predominant in literary works by women, stands as a metaphor for the difficult conditions women writers faced and the strategies which they used to sidestep the patriarchal imposition of silence (1). Using the myth as a point of reference, Vicki Mistacco assembles a collection of rich and deep-rooted literary works covering six centuries. Furthermore, she shows, through the myth of Philomela, the importance of act of weaving which is in fact an autobiographical text in disguise.

While male writers resort to the myth of Philomena and Procne to denounce the level of violence to which women revert in order to extract vengeance, Vicki Mistacco uses it to allow women writers to assume their rightful place in literature. In fact, she shows how these women succeeded in uttering their cries of rebellion by telling their story through the act of weaving. Philomena becomes, through her weaving, the symbol of women artists who break their silence to speak of rape and violence perpetrated by men. Victims at the onset, they become accusers. They reject the isolation and repression inflicted by a patriarchal society. The use of this myth suggests a positive evolution in women’s writings, a progressive freeing of the feminine voice and the development of a sororal readership capable of interpreting, remembering and sustaining a corpus of writings by women (3).

In order to be heard, women had to reject the cloak of modesty imposed by patriarchal rules. Until the beginning of the 20th century, they were required to

---

remain silent. Speaking one's mind was considered an act of indecency, a type of exhibitionism. Women could not afford to put their virtue or their honour in jeopardy. They had to conform to accepted rules of behaviour, to abide by the norms of chastity and conjugal fidelity, in fact to repress their own sexuality. Silence was the means to keep virtue and honour intact. Treatises on good manners from the Renaissance period stipulate that women must keep silent and, should they be educated, they should display their knowledge and their talents to their immediate family only. Indeed, to speak in public was tantamount to exhibiting their body shamefully. These rules of conduct meant that, for centuries, women's voices in literature were stifled.

Throughout the centuries, examples of suppression of women's voices are legion. Marie de France, touted as the first French female writer, denounced a jealous husband's brutality in her lay, *Le Laiüstic*, which depicts the killing of a nightingale. Anonymity is also considered a form of refusing to hear women's voices. In the 17th and 18th centuries, literary works, now acknowledged as masterpieces, were often published anonymously or under a pseudonym. In the 17th century, *La Princesse de Clèves*, written by Marie Madeleine de la Fayette, was thought to be of male authorship. In the same vein, Françoise de Graffigny saw her novel *Lettre d'une Péruvienne* attributed to men who had helped her with spelling and grammar.

Other means have been used to suppress the voice of women in literature. Vicki Mistacco states that ridicule was a favored ploy in devaluing works by women writers, but that the most effective one was silence. This sexism by omission is present in any anthology or textbook geared to shaping young men's tastes. The few instances where women merit mention are used to marginalize their work, to deny their value as role models for vigorous young men, or to show simply their lack of interest for the modern reader.

Contrary to anthologies from previous centuries, *Les Femmes et la tradition littéraire* illustrates women's refusal to be silent. Vicki Mistacco speaks of the violence to which women writers were exposed, and her book saves them from oblivion. She gives a new lease on life to an otherwise forgotten body of works by giving women another voice which, one hopes, will be stronger and never reduced to silence. *Les Femmes et la tradition littéraire* is evidence that the voice of women in literary tradition is firmly implanted and should never be silenced. ✱