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Letters to the Editor

Paul Lauter

John Benedict

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

College Department
W.W. Norton & Co., Inc.
500 Fifth Avenue
New York, N.Y. 10036

Dear Sirs:

I have recently received a brochure advertising the so-called "Major Authors Edition" of your anthology of English literature. The blurb absurdly advertises it as "the essential works of the essential authors."

More properly, it should be described as "Some Major (and Some Minor) Works by Thirty White Male British Authors." The failure of taste and judgment involved in presenting a volume of 2,688 pages which omits, for example, Jane Austen and George Eliot—to name but two "essential" female authors—might be comic, were it not for the fact that the names of so many formerly distinguished scholars were attached to the book.

I shall certainly try to insure that Norton books are not used in this college until some fundamental changes in your antediluvian policies are instituted, and I will urge my colleagues at other institutions to do likewise.

Paul Lauter, SUNY/College at Old Westbury

cc: Women's Studies Newsletter

Dear Professor Lauter:

I have your letter about the Major Authors Edition of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, and I think it might be helpful to explain how the edition came about. As you probably know, we publish a two-volume version of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (a brochure for which is enclosed) for the full-year survey of English literature, and it was necessary to boil all that material down into one volume for the Major Authors course, since that course is usually only one semester long. We therefore sent a questionnaire to teachers of such courses, and compiled our table of contents according to what those teachers told us they taught. (It turns out that perhaps one-fifth or one-sixth of the teachers who responded to the questionnaire were women.) As you will note in the brochure for the two-volume edition, a number of women authors are represented there, including Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing, and George Eliot. Had any of these authors been nominated for the Major Authors Edition, we would have put them in. I personally was especially anxious to have our selections from George Eliot in the Major Authors Edition, but many respondents to the questionnaire were very much against having excerpts from novels. In other words, excerpts from novels appear to be useful in the full-year course served by the two-volume edition, but not in the shorter course. Had we presented the George Eliot excerpts, or excerpts of novels by any of the other great English women novelists, we would have been faced with objections. We were, in other words, putting a book together for a specific course—certainly not trying to pass judgments. And perhaps the Major Authors Edition is inexpensive enough so that a novel by Eliot, Austen, or one of the Brontes could also be assigned.

I enclose brochures for the new revision of *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, for *The Norton Introduction to Literature*, and for *The Norton Reader*, Third Edition. I think you will find that more women authors are represented in these publications than in comparable anthologies. In addition, here is a brochure covering some of our other publications, so that you can see

what other efforts we are making in this very worthwhile direction, and an advance copy (before publication) of Adrienne Rich's *Poems: Selected and New*.

John Benedict, Vice President

cc: Women's Studies Newsletter

Women's Studies Newsletter

Box 334

Old Westbury, New York 11568

Sisters:

For the last few years, we have faithfully attended academic conventions. Like most of us who see ourselves as feminists, we have spent our time at women's sessions—talking about images of women in literature and popular culture, women's studies, feminist theories and strategies. We have loved the women's sessions and found them exciting, productive, energizing. But until recently, we did not know how many people we had not even begun to reach.

At the Popular Culture Association convention in St. Louis, March 20-22, 1975, we attended several of the non-feminist sessions (sessions "run" by non-feminist men), and we were shocked at the sexism displayed.

In one session, a male scholar refused to consider substituting "person" for "man"—even though he found himself reciting such absurdities as "and we can see the wife as a primitive man. . . ." "We heard a male academic insist on using the term "masculine" to mean "aggressive, analytical, rational, orderly, scientific" and "feminine" to mean "irrational, dark, chaotic, earthy." In one session, the one woman on the panel was publicly urged by the chairman to limit her presentation to 15 minutes, while the moderator and the other two men on the panel took 30 minutes or more for each of their papers.

In a session devoted to discussion of discrimination against minorities, the situations of Blacks and Appalachians were considered with great seriousness, but women were dismissed as "bra-burners." We found ourselves confronting the speakers who patronizingly told us, "What you women should do . . ." We walked out—usually followed by others.

We learned from these painful experiences that we have ghettoized ourselves in the past few years. By choosing the supportive atmosphere of women's sessions, we've ignored and been unaware of the rampant sexism in what our male counterparts are doing.

This letter is a plea to feminists to begin attending the "regular" sessions, not restricting ourselves to the women's. We have gained a great deal of strength from one another, and now we need to use that strength in combatting sexism outside our sessions. We need to point out sexist language whenever it occurs; point out unequal treatment of women; point out refusals to take women seriously. (If we're worried that our criticisms will affect our employment, we can always take off our name tags—since to many of our detractors, all women look alike.)

We need to be giving papers in the regular sessions; we need to be running them, and choosing what papers will be presented. We must keep our women's sessions, but we must take our feminist consciousnesses with us into the other sessions as well.

In sisterhood,

Emily Toth, University of New Orleans

Agate N. Krouse, University of Wisconsin