

INTERVIEW FEATURING DR. DIANE DUFFY – TRUSTEE OF THE ELIZABETH GASKELL HOUSE, UK AND DR. KIM SIMPSON – DEPUTY DIRECTOR OF THE CHAWTON HOUSE, UK

Natália C. P. BARCELLOS*

Over the last years, as a reflection of contemporary world issues that have raised feminist movements such as *Me too*, there has also been a greater interest in the literature of female expression in the academic scenario. With the pandemic, literature written by women has gained space beyond the academy, as seen by the number of book clubs, pages on social networks and digital influencers dedicated to reading and discussing both works by female authors of classics of universal literature, as well as contemporary Brazilian or foreign authors.

Throughout the Covid-Pandemic, it was also notable how engaged museums across the world were in taking part on the world wide web, providing people with great content such as talks on specific subjects, different guest speakers, studying groups, virtual tours, among others. On March 8th 2022, to celebrate the International Women's Day, houses of some of the most influential female writers ever existed hosted a special event entitled "Literary Letters by Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Mary Somerville and Elizabeth Gaskell", which brought together over 200 women from around the globe as spectators. During the event, personal letters of these writers and scientist were being read, bringing up facets of their personalities, reaching out to us in the audience, as if they were speaking directly to us. Perhaps a quite simple gesture, but very powerful if we think of the number of women everywhere who do not have the right to speak freely, nor to education. In fact, all of them, Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Elizabeth Gaskell and Mary Sommerville have known how difficult women's paths as writers or scientists were in their own patriarchal society. As a last contribution to this special issue on female writers of the 19th Century, I would like to present an interview with two of the hosts of this event, Dr. Kim Simpson, representing the Chawton House, which had belonged to Jane Austen's family, and Dr. Diane Duffy, representing Elizabeth Gaskell House.

* UNESP – Universidade Estadual Paulista Júlio de Mesquita Filho – FCLAr – Faculdade de Ciências e Letras de Araraquara – Programa de Pós-Graduação em Estudos Literários – Araraquara, São Paulo, Brasil. natalia.barcellos@unesp.br.

Natália C. P. Barcellos: Why do you think 19th century female writers are being rediscovered by contemporary readers and also writers especially during the pandemic? What is your perception about the impact of their writing on our current society?

Dr. Diane Duffy- Director of the Elizabeth Gaskell House, UK: First, let me deal with the first section of the question: why do you think 19th century female writers are being rediscovered by contemporary readers and also writers especially during the pandemic? Perhaps the cynical answer would be cheapness and ease of access. All or at least most classic literature is available free of charge online.

The more thoughtful answer would be that the classics tell good stories well. They have either a happy ending, or the tragedy has some cathartic effect- *Mill on the Floss*, for example, is tragic but it is still a good story and there are lessons to be learned about life and society which I will come onto later. *Pride and Prejudice* is a romantic tale on the surface, and it can be read as such. It is enjoyable and we share the happiness of the hero and heroine, despite what we might have read before. It is an escape from the worries and tribulations of Covid.

Some modern literature tries to be very structurally clever, which in my opinion often spoils the story, other works are too simplistic to hold our attention- there is quite a lot of rubbish published now. I am not a lover of the present tense style that is so popular now, readers are put in the position of witnesses watching everything unroll before our eyes. Again, personal opinion, but I like to be told a story and maybe I am not alone in that view. It seems to me that there are very few modern novels that will stand the test of time like *Frankenstein* has. Such a wonderful book that examines what it is that makes us ‘human’.

But it should also be asked which classics have become popular now. What do these new and enthusiastic readers read? Are these ‘popular’ novels all classics that have been televised or filmed? I think this is a very pertinent question to ask. Jane Austen’s novels have all been serialized on TV, some have been filmed, so have some of Gaskell’s, George Eliot’s, the Bronte’s etc. This, of course, popularized the classics. People will read *Jane Eyre*, but are they as likely to read *Villette*? Why are only some novels transferred to visual media and others not? Presumably, because some are more accessible and visually viable – some are just brilliant stories.

Good stories usually satisfy a need to escape and when escape is more vital than during a pandemic when we are imprisoned in our homes? Most of these works satisfy the need to escape if only on the surface, and not all readers want to dig

beneath to find the darker side offered by these texts and there usually is a darker side. Women writers, apart from being very prolific in the 19th century, often wrote on a superficially domestic/romantic level which hid their darker subtextual meanings. Ann Radcliffe, for example, used her Gothic motifs as metaphors. Elizabeth Gaskell was also very good at this. As a minister's wife, she did meet conflict and controversy head on, but she could not go too far- *Ruth* is written in a very religious framework and her heroine had to die. Even this did not satisfy everyone. Some members of her own congregation burned the first volume, and on the other side of the controversy, Charlotte Bronte was saddened by the ending and asked why *Ruth* had to die.

Finally, of course, people have had more time during lockdown, life was more leisurely and somehow there is a view that classics are time-consuming reads.

Now what about the relevance?

As I have mentioned before, *Frankenstein* examines what makes us human. It is a wonderful text about God, parenting, the position of women and women writers and humanity itself. We cite Mary Shelley regularly, she is as iconic as is her mother, but those readers who may have turned to *Frankenstein* during lockdown may not have read any of Mary Shelley's other novels- *Valperga*, for instance or *Lodore*. The former is a wonderful tale examining forms/styles of government. Very relevant for today, I should think! Mary Wollstonecraft is also popular today, but for her philosophy and life rather than her novels. She was brought up an Anglican but heavily influenced by the Unitarian teachings of Joseph Priestly and her views on education and equality mirror Gaskell's who was also a Unitarian. Gaskell's religion certainly underpins her work. *Mary Barton* is a tale of poverty, terrible working conditions, living conditions and a lack of understanding between the ruling manufacturing classes (who become the aristocracy of the new industrial city) and their employees. In life, Elizabeth Gaskell worked hard to try to alleviate the suffering of the poor in Manchester. Her letters reflect that position and in Mrs Chadwick's biography of Gaskell (1910), she explains how *Mary Barton* made workers across Lancashire feel connected. They felt that they were not alone in their suffering:

To those who were familiar with Manchester at this time, the story easily revealed the district and the true life of the cotton operatives. Every detail is so faithful, and shows Mrs. Gaskell's intimate knowledge of the lives of those around her during the trying time of the "hungry forties." The distress in Manchester was typical of the condition of other Lancashire towns, and the workers of these surrounding districts were just as grateful to her for the graphic story as were

the operatives in Manchester. A working man from Oldham was so touched by the faithful story, that he showed his gratitude by making a pilgrimage to PlymouthGrove once a year, accompanied by his children, in order to show them the house in which the author of *Mary Barton* had lived.¹

Gaskell, like many of her female contemporaries (including Mary Wollstonecraft) were also keen to warn women about inappropriate marriages, marriages which look socially desirable but which would be death to the woman. ‘The Grey Woman’ is a prime example, showing how Anna is coerced into a marriage which looks good on the surface but is actually dire. This is a wonderful short story. Another Unitarian writer Anne Marsh Caldwell who was related to Elizabeth’s family, the Holland’s, by marriage, is also very vocal on this issue. *Emilia Wyndham* and *Love and Duty* are excellent examples of her work which illustrate the consequences of bad marriage choices. The idea of successful marriages/partnerships is very relevant today.

Elizabeth Gaskell also worked hard in the community. She taught in Sunday schools in order to educate the working classes. She worked in the sewing school that provided education and occupations for women during the cotton famine. Her books tend not to show this side of her whereas her letters are full of such comments.

It has been my mission over my academic career as a PhD student and subsequently to discover some lost 19th century writers. Marie Corelli in her day was the most popular writer around (150,000 copies to HG Wells 15,000)- who has even heard of her now? What about Letitia Landon, granted she is coming back into fashion now, and the antiquarian Anna Eliza Bray. So many lost women who all had important things to say. I am pleased to note that there is now a resurgence of academic interest in Ann Radcliffe, so influential in her day and after.

Dr. Kim Simpson- Deputy director of the Chawton House, UK: One of our main charitable objectives at Chawton House is to promote research into the work of 18th and 19th century women writers, and to share work from both canonical and lesser-known women writers with a broad public. In other words, what we term ‘the recovery project’, which has been going on in scholarship since the late 1970s, has always underpinned public and scholarly programming at Chawton House, informing things like study days, conferences, and exhibitions - we have two major exhibitions each year.

¹ Chadwick Haunts, *Homes and Stories*, 1910, pp. 231-232.

During the pandemic, we moved a lot of this programme online, reaching a wider audience who suddenly had more time to engage, and who were also searching for ways to escape - Austen has often been read for these reasons during times of hardship, or to understand our current situation - see, for example, our 2021 Gothic month programme on ‘when nature strikes back’: <https://chawtonhouse.org/2021/09/gothic-programme-at-chawton-house-when-nature-strikes-back/> .

I think a really good example of the ways that C19 women’s writing has come to matter in different ways over the last couple of years is our reading group. We have run this group since we opened almost 20 years ago, and for many years it was made up primarily of interested locals and volunteers. When the pandemic happened, we went online, doubled in size, and found a much broader reach, across Europe and particularly in America and Canada. Although all women, the group is also now made up of a broader range of ages and nationalities. We’ve read a huge range of works, all voted on by the members - from poetry and novels to conduct and children’s literature. During the pandemic, the group was another way of connecting at a time that was very isolating and stressful for many members. Our reading often allows us to reflect on current events - Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*, for example, let us talk through what experiences of climate change and pandemics might have been like in the past, but also how women in the past thought about the future; *The Woman of Colour* helped us think about the legacies of writing about race that we are still dealing with today. Reading these women writers enables us to chart the development of the novel form, and to think about the history of gender inequality - one of the questions we often consider is the extent to which the material we are reading is feminist, and whether it continues to be worth reading in a modern context.

I think the reading group demonstrates the ways that early women writers can still inform connections between women today. They provoke inspiration and admiration, but also allow us to bond over our own modernity - to consider our differences as well as similarities to these women. Some of the things we read prove pretty impenetrable still, whilst others are surprising in their relevance. The search for new voices and discoveries is, to me, a recognition that public discourse is continually developing and that our canons need to shift according to these changes as we search for connections in the past.

